MASSIVE 2023 PREVIEW SPECIAL

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

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FIRST LOOK

Park Beyond

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PREVIEW

STARFIELD

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RESIDENT EVIL 4

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(02) 8227 6486
www.techmags.com.au
future@crmaus.com.au

PC PowerPlay

Future Publishing Australia,
PO Box Q1179, Queen Victoria Building,
NSW 1230
Corporate Web: www.futureplc.com

Editorial
Editor **Ben Mansill**
ben.mansill@futurenet.com
Creative Director **Troy Coleman**
troy.coleman@futurenet.com

Photography
All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Advertising
auadvertising@futurenet.com

Management
Managing Director: **Neville Daniels**
Sales Director: **Paul Marttila**
paul.marttila@futurenet.com

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Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
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GOING BEYOND

Our big featured games this issue are Park Beyond – which is about as bright and silly as a game gets, and Space Marine 2 – which is kinda the complete opposite.

Rollercoasters, man... if you're ... of my age, or thereabouts, you've probably got warm memories of the legendary Theme Park games of old. But this isn't that. This is OTT and completely ridiculous. In a good way. The devs have thrown basic physics out the window and gravity is now a tool with rules unfamiliar to normal Earthlings, to be abused and exploited. It's even got a story mode, which is optional, because as we like to say here at PCPP – if there's no point, that's the point.

While Space Marine 2 is oh so dark and serious. What a contrast. I'll be playing both, and if neither interest you that's quite alright, because we've compiled a big huge massive list of every game that matters (that we know about so far, at least!) that's expected for 2023.

We've also got a bit of a Starfield update. And you can expect more of that in PCPP in the months ahead because it's gonna be so great and not a launch let down like CP2077. Nu-up. This one will be golden perfection from Day 1. Don't quote me on that. Ok, great thanks.

We hope your 2023 is off to a nice start, and Santa brought you an RTX 4090. If not – who cares? That 1080 Ti in your rig is good for another year! Yay! So much gaming! So much goodness.

Ben Mansill

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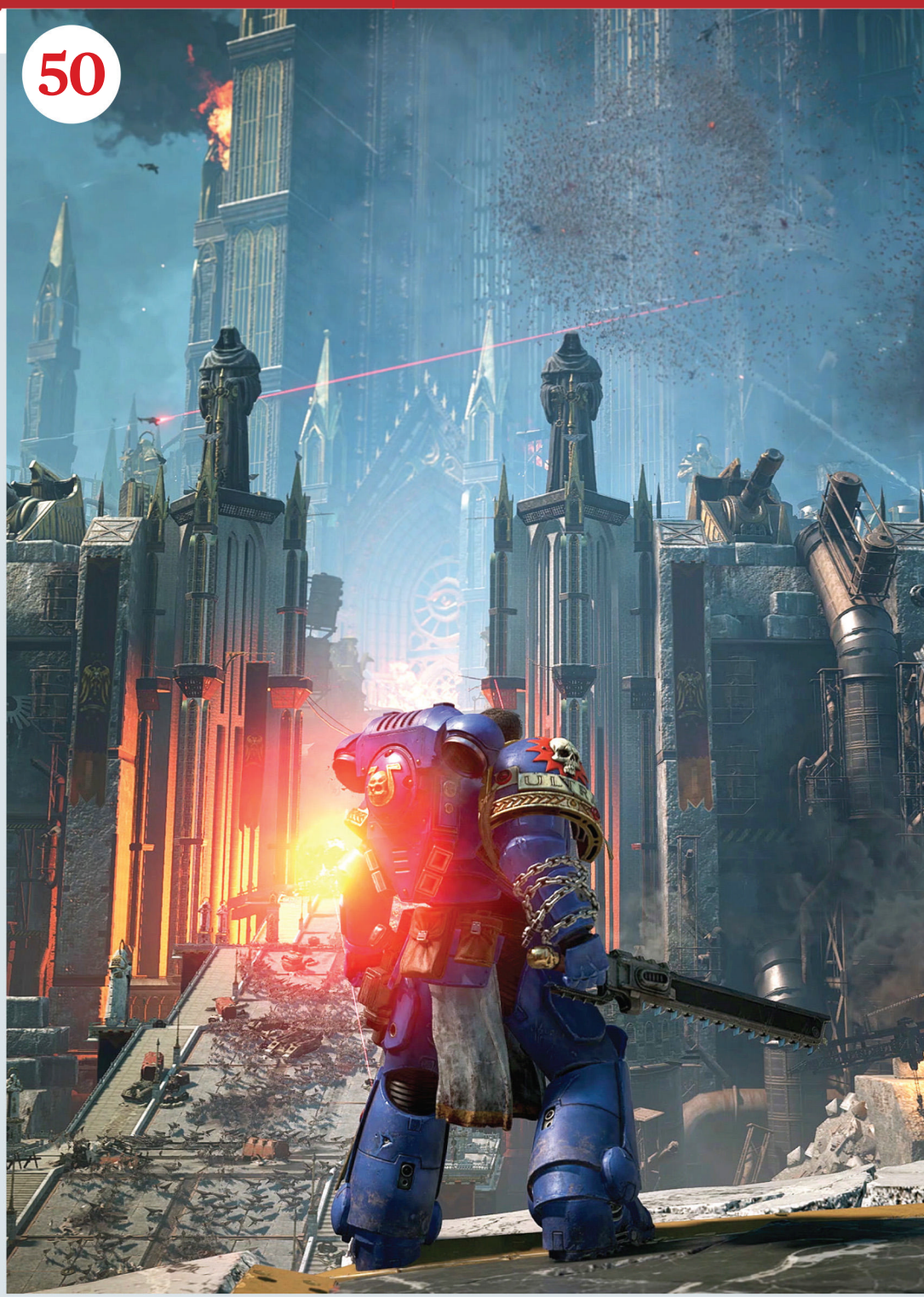

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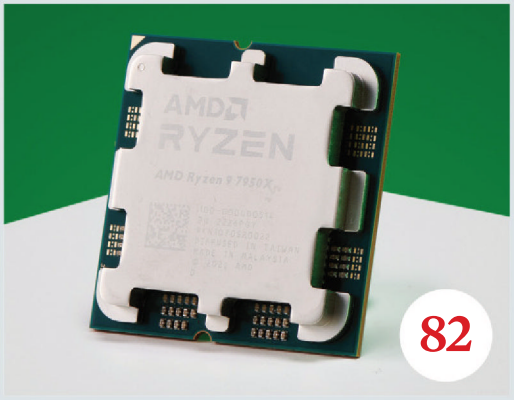

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BLOWING UP

CALL OF DUTY is still huge – and that could stop Microsoft buying Activision

Call of Duty's now been part of the gaming scenery for two decades, and ever since the original *Modern Warfare* (2007) took it into the stratosphere, it has become a regular blockbuster release. That cadence matters, and the sheer size of the series has meant that *CoD* has become a focal point for Microsoft's proposed US$65 billion acquisition of Activision Blizzard.

There were two years between the first two games: ever since, it's had a yearly entry like clockwork. No other shooter releases like this, but that reliability became a huge factor in *CoD*'s growth. Over the last decade especially it has come to inspire fierce loyalty among its huge fanbase before, in 2020, *Warzone* offered a free-to-play *CoD* and saw huge success.

The annualised release cycle for *Call of Duty* is only comparable to something like EA's *FIFA* series, and its omnipresence arguably owes as much to volume as quality.

This year's mainline entry was *Modern Warfare II*, as good as the series has been in many years, but perhaps even bigger was the release of *Warzone 2.0*. Both launched with kinks and in *Warzone*'s case especially it wasn't too long before we saw invincible players and flying boats. With a launch on this scale, those first few weeks must feel like whack-a-mole for developers.

MWII QUICKLY BECAME THE FASTEST-SELLING TITLE IN THE SERIES' HISTORY

Modern Warfare II quickly became the fastest-selling title in the series' history, while metrics for *Warzone 2.0* are yet to be released. Such success has led to the series receiving scrutiny from regulators looking at the Activision Blizzard acquisition because *CoD*, by some distance, is the 'anti-competitive' element they're most worried about.

HZ SO GOOD

600HZ ON THE GO

Here's that 600Hz laptop screen you were after. You don't want it? Too bad, pal, you've got it courtesy of panel manufacturer BOE. The 16-inch panel will turn any pedestrian laptop into Sonic the Hedgehog using fancy oxide backplane tech. Just don't think about the GPU you need to power the thing. ■ ***JR***

DEALS ON WHEELS

BUNDLE WOES

Microsoft messed up recently, accidentally selling a $200 *Forza Horizon* bundle for a few cents via its Swedish digital store. Players took advantage in droves, but were disappointed a week later when the games disappeared from their libraries. ■ ***JW***

TRUE DISCORD

CHAOS ON THE SERVER

The UK government had a bright idea: let's set up a Discord channel and leave emojis on! It went as well as you'd expect, with the great British public dreaming up inventive ways to criticise the Tories via emojis and getting creative with usernames: variants on Jeremy Hunt's name being popular. ■ ***MT***

Activision almost lucked into the yearly model: Infinity Ward invented the series but, when Activision needed a third entry and IW was working on *Modern Warfare*, Treyarch came in.

Let's put some numbers on this. *Warzone* has attracted more than 125 million players since launch, while over its lifetime the series has sold 425 million copies of the games. This all adds up to US$30 billion in revenue.

YOU SHALL NOT PASS

Those trying to block Microsoft's deal include Sony, which has made *CoD* a pillar in its opposition. It argues that *CoD* is so successful that its removal from non-Microsoft platforms would damage them.

CoD exclusivity is only one issue: opponents of the deal also argue that, should *CoD* ever be combined with Game Pass, this would risk becoming a monopoly and giving Microsoft "an unparalleled advantage" over competing services. There is an active deal with Sony that keeps *CoD* off Game Pass, which shows this is not a new concern.

Activision Blizzard's shareholders have long since approved the Microsoft deal, but due to the sheer size it's going to have to navigate all those regulators first. The EU and the US Federal Trade Commission are among those looking into it, and the deal is being reviewed by 16 different government bodies. Of all Activision Blizzard's many assets, the one that's causing conflict is a shooter series that, some claim, is now too big to fail. ■

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Word up
The first ever public voted Oxford word of the year is 'goblin mode'.

Heavy stuff
The *Team Fortress 2* community has been begging for more support, Valve finally released an update improving its creator tools.

Epic upgrade
A recent *Fortnite* update moved it onto developer Epic's Unreal Engine 5.1 toolset, and it looks ace.

Dream on
In 2021, streamer Dream was exposed as a *Minecraft* cheat by MinecrAvenger. Now they've been exposed as a cheat too.

Sneaking suit
An all-black suit for *CoD Warzone* rose up the Steam best-seller list due to its camoflaging properties.

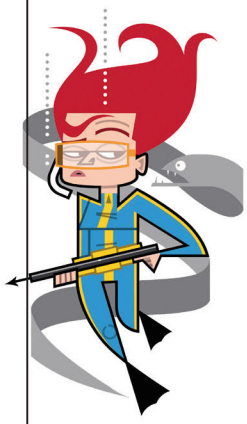
Great PARP
Miles Morales' emotional story beats will no longer be interrupted with airhorn, after a bugfix. Shame.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Time makes fools of us all. It's 1am, and you realise that instead of eating properly and getting a good night's sleep, you've spent the entire night playing MMOs and snacking on an oversized bag of roasted peanuts. Time fool. It's Wednesday, and you remember that you were supposed to make a stew to use up those carrots over the weekend, but instead you ordered takeaway and now they've gone all gross and soft. Time fool. It's December 12, and The Spy realises that The Spy has to write The Spy's last rumour column of the year, but The Game Awards happened a few days ago and the industry has been busy confirming all of the things that, just a week ago, would have been a hot insider tip. Time fool.



THE SPY
The Spy needs to remember to use up the veg.

It's 2022, and 15 years ago you released the first trailer for *Beyond Good & Evil 2*. The 'you' here is Ubisoft, and despite ostensibly working on the game in some capacity for over a decade and a half now, recent reports suggest that it's still a long way from release. Time fool.

The report comes from Inside Gaming's Tom Henderson, who claims to have seen images and video – provided anonymously, and on the condition they don't go public – that he thinks suggest the game may have been rebooted since the E3 2018 pre-alpha demo walkthrough. That was the last time Ubisoft showed off the game in any real detail – a vertical slice that toured viewers through a mix of exploration, combat, hoverbike riding, and *No Man's Sky*-style space flight.

According to Henderson, though, the footage he's seen doesn't match the quality of that demo. "Any structures that had some form of detail were very low quality; almost like the game was being played on an ultra-low setting," he writes. Much of the footage took place on bare planets, using blocked structures as buildings.

The Spy would note that this isn't indicative of a full 'reboot'. Vertical slice E3 demos are widespread practice – getting one specific part of the game as polished as possible to present it to the public. It's worth noting that what you see at these shows is likely not a reflection on what the entire game looks like at that moment – just what the developers hope the game will be like.

But also that demo was four years ago, and it sounds like there's still plenty to be done before we see our next tease of the game, let alone a release. It's certainly not hard to assume it's been a difficult development process across the years. In 2020, director Michel Ancel left Ubisoft shortly before the publication of a Libération article alleging toxic leadership. According to the article, Ancel's constant changes in scope for the game led to exhaustion, depression, and burnout from the team.

Ubisoft's comment to Henderson for his report is what you'd expect, "*BG&E2*'s development is underway and the team is hard at work to deliver on its ambitious promise."

For all the reported problems, Ubisoft is clearly bullish about continuing with the game's development – whatever stage it's currently in. Even if it's many, many years before the game comes out, there's always the chance that it will be worth the wait. Then, as is often the case, time will have made fools of us all. But at least we'll be fools with a good game to play. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THERE'S STILL PLENTY TO BE DONE BEFORE WE SEE OUR NEXT TEASE

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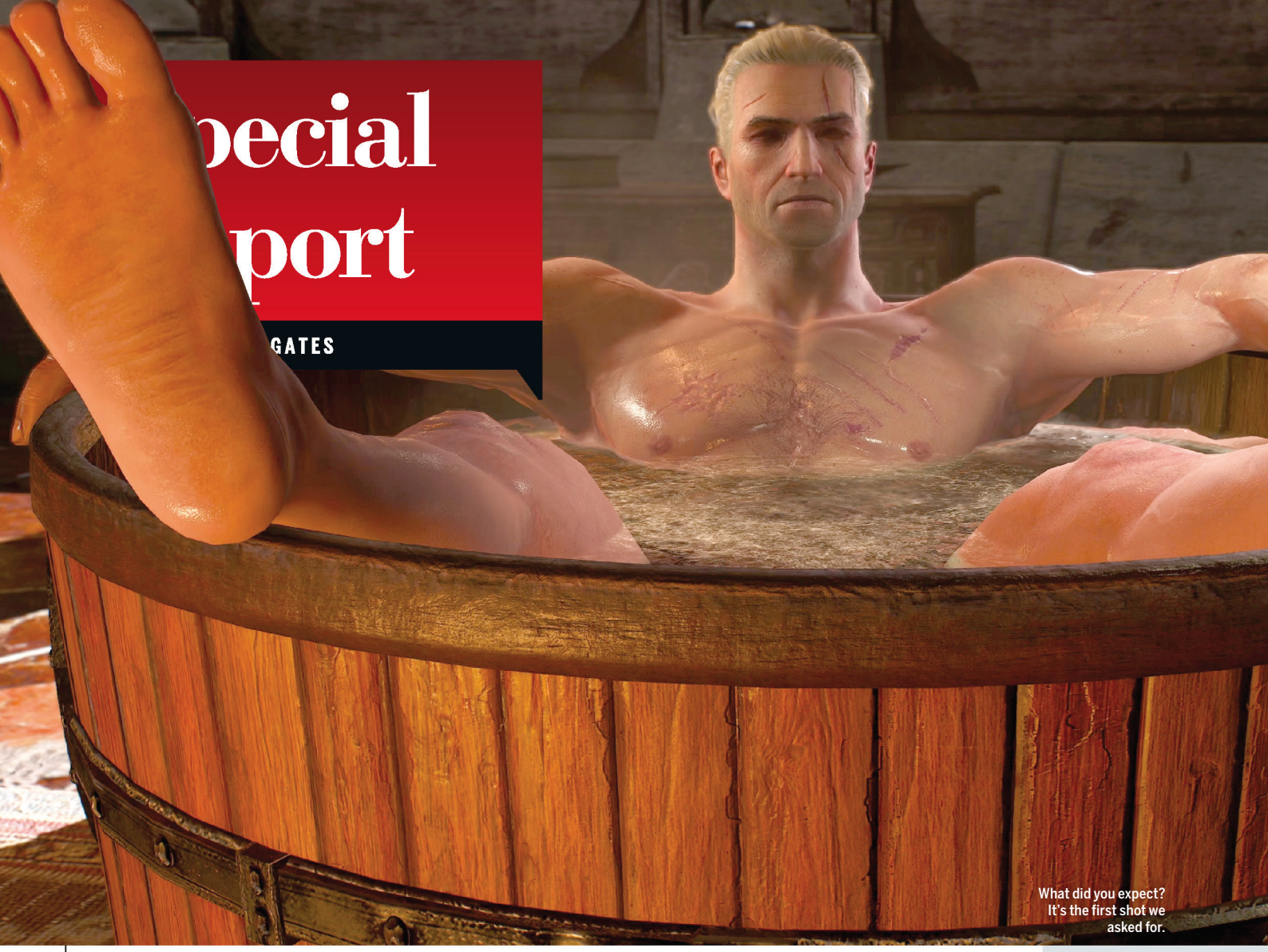


pecial
port

GATES

What did you expect? It's the first shot we asked for.

GERALT RELOADED

The big new update for THE WITCHER 3 adds to an RPG that's aged beautifully

A year after CD Projekt Red released *The Witcher 2*, the studio followed with the *Enhanced Edition*, an enormous update with the patch notes to prove it. A 102 item changelog detailed everything from corrected item descriptions to "fixed reverb in sewers in Chapter 3", on top of a lengthy list of more substantial additions: new quests, cinematics and ending sequences. A fledgling CD Projekt had done the same thing with the first *Witcher* in 2008, and though I can't find it online, I swear I once pored over a multi-page PDF describing every change made to that first adventure. I don't know if any developer is more committed to documenting the minutia of changes to a massive game (other than Bay12 Games with *Dwarf Fortress*, which is in a league of its own).

"Even for *Cyberpunk*, this is something that hasn't really changed," says communications director Robert Malinowski. "We don't abandon games. The *Enhanced Edition* of *The Witcher* was made for a reason, as well. It was a game that was good, but it could've been better."

The Witcher 3, which I was playing as I talked to Malinowski about CD Projekt's first RPG, was more than good. It was a masterpiece in 2015, and made better by a year of updates and expansions. It never officially got its *Enhanced Edition*, though, and I wish CD Projekt had used the name here, for old time's sake. Because *The Witcher 3*'s next-gen update is much more than a sparkly coat of ray tracing.

LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

Ray tracing may even be the last reason to care about this update. Outdoors, you're unlikely to even notice it's on, outside of the dramatic framerate hit it causes as in every other game; most of *The Witcher 3*'s outdoor lighting, including its breathtaking pink and orange sunsets, remains unchanged. I spotted a few realistic touches with it enabled, like the sun's speckled reflection on the grey waters of Crookback Bog, but that's it. Indoors, the ray traced lighting is more pronounced, with directional illumination coming in through windows, but this is clearly a game retrofitted for ray tracing rather than being designed with it in mind.

That'd be disappointing if the rest of the upgrades weren't such natural, welcome improvements. There's DLSS3 and AMD FSR support, which will be great for performance even without ray tracing. There's a photo mode, though it's not quite as detailed at *Cyberpunk 2077*'s. There's a new quest that rewards you with Henry Cavill's Geralt armour from the Netflix series (and it's got a pretty cool bit of story, too). A newly nimble-fingered

Light touch

Aside from the single new quest, this update is about refinement, not re-opening the book on Geralt's adventures. "In terms of story, the general assumption was not to touch it," Malinowski says. "It's complete at this point. We're not trying to reinvent the wheel here. This is a facelift, for lack of a better word."

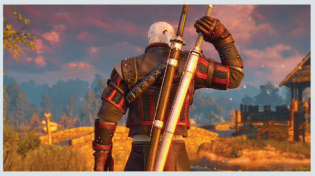
FAR LEFT: Ray tracing adds little to the outdoor environments, but Toussaint remains a stunning, lush fantasy France.

LEFT: The integrated upscaled texture mod holds up very nicely.

SUNDAY BEST *Gearalt of Rivia (get it?) gets some new goodies*

CAVILL COSPLAY
Henry's black leather look comes to *The Witcher 3* as reward for completing a new quest.

CHINESE ARMOUR
The next-gen update includes full Chinese voice acting for the first time in the series.



KOREAN SWORD
Same for Korean VO. CDPR marked the new language support with some bonus gear.

WRINKLY NILFGAARD
A new menu toggle gives every Nilfgaardian the Netflix ballsack armour. Blessed.

Geralt can now harvest herbs with a single click without opening up a loot menu. And CD Projekt has done a major bug fixing pass to fix issues that have lingered for years. Some of them are deep cuts.

"If you remember, there was this 'Slavic folk music stops' meme where Geralt sees that the key to Yennefer's room is described as a 'common item,'" says longtime PR lead Radek Grabowski. "We actually fixed that, so now it's a rare item. Once it launches, Reddit will be full of those tidbits people are going to dig out from the game."

The Witcher 3: Enhanced-Edition-in-all-but-name also incorporates five mods, including the *HD Reworked* project, which has racked up more than 5.2 million downloads on Nexusmods. People love their 4K textures. Another polishes monster textures; another fixes little visual issues like clipping but also rebalances some abilities, and was actually created by a *Witcher 3* developer in his spare time.

COMMUNITY CHEST

I was surprised that CD Projekt Red didn't opt to take on upgrades like 4K textures internally – surely the original assets were higher quality than that, right? – but Malinowski has a simple explanation, "You know, when work is good, work is good."

"The way we work with the community, if the community creates something awesome, why not embrace it?" Grabowski says. "I can say that the modders were excited to have their work featured in the version you can get from GOG and Steam and whatnot."

RAY TRACING MAY EVEN BE THE LAST REASON TO CARE ABOUT THIS UPDATE

Other small changes reflect the years of hindsight CD Projekt's designers have on the game. My favorite touch is that most of the map icons (that daunting sea of question marks) are now disabled by default; the HUD can autohide to give you a cleaner view of the Toussaint countryside, which remains breathtaking. On controllers, a quick cast feature lets you toss out a spell without using the radial menu. A new default camera option pulls in closer to Geralt, feeling subtly more *God of War* and less 2000s PC RPG. (Don't worry, 2000s PC RPG lovers: you can easily change it back).

These changes have been a long time coming; CD Projekt announced it in September 2020, three months before *Cyberpunk 2077* arrived, and... well, you probably know the rest. This update has had its own development troubles: It was delayed from 2021 to 2022, and in external partner Saber Interactive's hands until earlier this year when CDPR took it in-house. But the result seems worth the wait – it helps to have one of the finest games of the decade to work from as a base, I guess.

I wondered if there was any temptation to plant seeds in *The Witcher 3* that would blossom in the upcoming Witcher games, but Malisowski says that's just too far away – and not what this update is about. "A lot of time will pass before something happens," he says. It would be unfair to even hint at something here.

"You know, we try not to announce before we're ready to announce," he adds with a laugh. "We are pretty self-aware in that way." ■

Wes Fenlon

QA Q&A

SCOTTY LODGE of Hyper Luminal Games shines a light on the QA process

Hyper Luminal has an interesting business model. It develops games, but also offers QA services to other companies (clients have included Sumo Digital and Disney). Scotty, as development manager, looks after the QA team. Before entering the game industry, he had a very different – but curiously related – job.

Growing up, there wasn't much of a tech industry around him. "I did what most people do around my parts, and entered the oil and gas industry," says Scotty. In foreshadowing of his future role, he was a quality controller. He would test pipes that came in, ensuring that they were suitable to pass on to the welders. A solid job, but not one that satisfied his passion for games.

"I quit my job, moved south, and pursued a college course, doing animation and digital art. I cut my teeth in the industry working at Outplay." After almost two years there he went on to the much larger Build A Rocket Boy (founded by Leslie Benzies, formerly of Rockstar), and then to Hyper Luminal Games. Today, he's settled in as an important part of the HLG team, and he's perfectly placed to answer a question regarding a poorly understood subject: what does the QA team *do*?

"I want to dismiss this idea that QAs sit and play games all day and get paid for it," says Scotty, "because while playing a game is a big part of our job, it's not what you'd expect. There's so many layers to QA these days. You've got anything from a QA tester, which is people who just test the functionality side of things, to QA analysts who are more focussed on analytics and live ops. And then you've got your QA engineers, which are a bit more technical. When you've got a developer who's spent a lot of their time working on something, they can often get tunnel vision on a certain aspect of the game. So that's when an end user perspective comes in, and really helps us focus on, 'Well if I was playing this game on release, what would I expect to see?'"

GETTING TESTY

One aspect of QA work that few people know about, Scotty says, is the involvement in design iteration. "Talking about that certain user experience, what feels good to play; because even though these people are working on these games and engines, they're not actually sitting down with a pad or a keyboard or mouse and playing it from that perspective. So, that's quite a lot of our job as well. When we're interviewing and bringing people in, they're really surprised by that. Because once again, they have this notion of, 'I thought you just got paid to play videogames all day!' and it's a lot more in depth now, there's a lot of reporting involved, talking to clients, things like that."

Scotty's team will always have the same people playing the same game, but this isn't always the case for external QA testing companies, which can lead to gaps in knowledge over the development period on the QA side. An internal team will sidestep that issue, but the size of a QA team can vary wildly. Companies that Scotty's worked for or with have had "anything from 60 people [total] with 5 QA, through to 100 people with 20 QA".

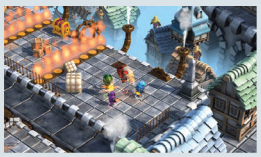
No matter how big or talented the QA team, the flawless game does not exist – and it's always QA that get called out for any bugs or glitches, leading to the running joke in QA circles that, "We're always the first people to blame if something goes wrong, but the last people to be congratulated when it goes well."

QA is an excellent road into the industry, as it requires no experience, but plenty of dedication and a willingness to learn. And next time you run into a bug? The QA team know about it, trust me; but it's still there because the available time was spent fixing something even worse. ■

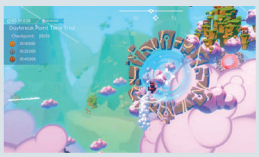
Luke Kemp

PLAYING DEV

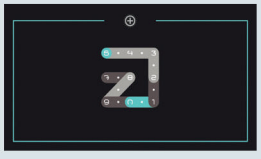
Hyper Luminal develops its own games, too



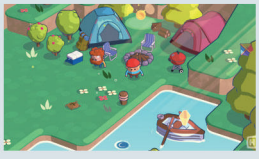
BIG CROWN SHOWDOWN
Adorable widdle knights fight one another for the crown in this four-player game.



CLOUD JUMPER
This trade-'em-up will have you soaring through the sky with some very pixelated graphics.



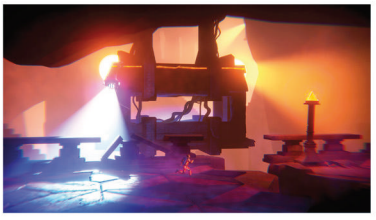
SEN: SEVEN EIGHT NINE
Co-developed with Locogame, this minimalist puzzle game is also available on mobile.



PINE HEARTS
Hyper Luminal will be publishing this open world puzzle game set in a cartoony caravan park.

"I WANT TO DISMISS THIS IDEA THAT QAS SIT AND PLAY GAMES ALL DAY"

Boomerang X saw HLG on both QA and co-development duties.



ABOVE: *Curious Expedition 2* didn't end in disaster thanks to HLG.

LEFT: Ghostbutter's endearingly disturbing snap-'em-up *Penko Park* enjoyed HLG's QA expertise.

DNA Tracing

GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

"MUCH OF THIEF'S AMBIENCE WAS MADE UP OF FOUR-SECOND, LOOPING DRONES"

SOUND GARDEN

The great ghost of LOOKING GLASS hovers over Deus Ex, BioShock and Guitar Hero

"The term 'looking glass' readily brings to mind warped fantasy worlds: Alice in Wonderland, twisted smiles and a sense of not quite knowing what you're getting into. As a company splash screen, it felt a fitting intro to *Thief* – with its Tweedledum guards and servants of the Trickster, minions of chaos and nature who communicated in a kind of rhyming babyspeak ("Call the dark! Call the black! Bringsie forth I call it back!"). *Thief*'s first level certainly takes you down a rabbit hole of sorts: first into the sewers, to surface within the grounds of a manor, then down a well, to finally emerge among the rat poison and beer barrels of Lord Bafford's basement.

Yet take a look at the logo of Looking Glass Studios from the time, and you'll see a telescopic eyeglass – the same strange steampunk device fitted into the right socket of *Thief* protagonist Garrett, after his own orb was plucked out in some primordial Trickster ritual. And that particular 'looking glass' came about thanks to cutscene writer Terri Brosius.

"I'm taking a risk here," she recalled thinking, in conversation with MIT's GAMBIT Game Lab in 2012. "I'm writing about somebody taking an eye out while chanting some verse. Now I have to wait for three days before I get to hear back whether I'm fired."

Terri, along with Eric Brosius and Greg LoPiccolo, had come to Looking Glass just as their musical careers had begun to falter. The trio had played in a popular Boston band, the Pixies-esque Tribe. But, discovering that their appeal didn't extend far outside the New England area, they gradually migrated to Looking Glass – Terri contributing weird fiction and becoming the voice of the AI antagonist Shodan in *System Shock*, while Eric and LoPiccolo wrote soundtracks and helped shape the studio's minimalist approach to sound design. Much of *Thief*'s ambience was made up of four-second, looping drones – single held notes rather than a dramatic musical score.

"Less is more," Eric Brosius told GAMBIT. "I found that it almost hypnotised you and sucked you into what you were doing, and made you very aware of stuff around you, because of the simplicity of what you were hearing. We were keenly aware that this would be the first stealth game that would really rely on audio cues."

RED DEAD

By the end of *Thief*'s development, LoPiccolo had risen to the role of project lead – appropriately, since *Thief* centred sound as a mechanic in a way few first-person games have managed, before or since. Players had to listen for mumbling or whistling to determine the location of nearby guards – and take care to avoid marble floors where possible, for fear of alerting those guards in turn. After release, *Thief* fans would playfully rib Looking Glass for Garrett's 'tap shoes', so noisy were his footsteps.

Some of *Thief*'s earliest design concepts, however, came from Ken Levine. The future *BioShock* designer's first games industry job was at Looking Glass, where he worked alongside Doug Church to invent worlds for the company's next action RPG. His rejected ideas included *School for Wizards*, *Dark Elves Must Die* and *Better Red Than Undead* – the latter a 1950s pulp story about a CIA agent fighting communists in Russia during a zombie outbreak. The seeds for *Thief*, however, came from *Dark Camelot* – a retelling of Arthurian legend in which you would play a black-skinned Mordred, and in which King Arthur would be a villainous nobleman guilty of racial

RIGHT: *System Shock* is getting a remake, courtesy of Nightdive Studios and out in March 2023.

TAFFER CHATTER

The best of* Thief's *dunderheaded guards

"They just don't make bears like they used to."

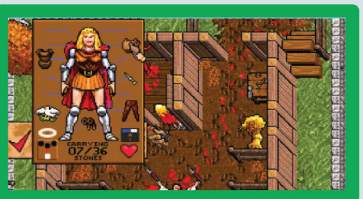
"Scurry off, or you'll acquire some unnecessary ventilation."

"I work better when I'm drunk. It makes me fearless."

"Hey, bad guy! You're not s'posed to be here. Go home."

MIRROR DIMENSION

The invention of the immersive sim



ULTIMA VII
Deeply interactive fantasy RPG.

ULTIMA UNDERWORLD
The thinking person's *Wolfenstein 3D*.

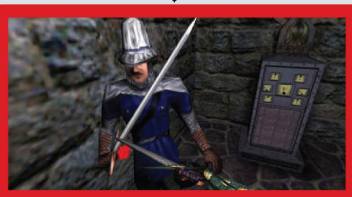
WING COMMANDER
The model for space dogfighting.

ULTIMA UNDERWORLD II
Haunted tombs led to *System Shock*.

TERRA NOVA
Mechs and *Wing Commander*-style FMVs.

SYSTEM SHOCK
A 'space dungeon' and early masterpiece.

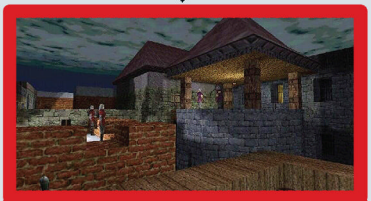
KEY
- Looking Glass Studios
- Origin Systems
- Irrational Games
- Ion Storm Austin



THIEF
Film noir fantasy.

SYSTEM SHOCK 2
Used *Thief*'s engine and sound team.

DEUS EX
The *Thief* team's next project.



THIEF II
Heists and burglaries galore.

BIOSHOCK
Levine's spiritual *Shock* sequel.

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FUTURE

prejudice (a theme Levine would ultimately return to in *BioShock Infinite*).

While the swordfighting and medieval fantasy transferred to *Thief*, almost everything else changed as studio founder Paul Neurath landed on the theme of burglary. "Looking Glass audio was so far ahead of everything else," Levine told GAMBIT. "It was such a powerful tool, and we really wanted to exploit that."

At the time, there was no such thing as the stealth genre – by strange coincidence, *Thief* and *Metal Gear Solid* would launch almost on top of each other. And so Levine drew inspiration from submarine games like *Silent Hunter* – specifically "how powerful you were when you were unseen, and how weak you were when you were spotted".

"I started writing documents about thermocline layers," Levine remembered. "Submarines will go through those because they form a barrier to sonar. I started thinking about how we could build a terrain that's based upon sound." Either Church or lead programmer Tom Leonard came up with the idea of using lightmaps in the level to indicate how hidden the player was, adding a visual dimension to Levine's premise.

BRAUN NOISE

Soon afterwards Levine left the company, alongside Jon Chey and Rob Fermier, to set up Irrational Games. But they didn't go far: Looking Glass incubated the new studio throughout its first project, *System Shock 2* – providing tech support on the *Thief* engine, and of course, sound design. That signature eerie drone is present on the Von Braun, a space station populated by dead bodies and audio logs.

The absence of living NPCs was a design precept Looking Glass had decided on years prior – having made two RPGs in the *Ultima* universe and grown tired of the limitations of text conversations. The dead, they figured, would draw less attention to the boundaries of their otherwise cleverly simulated worlds. *Thief*'s drunken, guards were an extension of the same idea – though alive, speaking to them was out of the question. Your job was to stay out of their way. It's this fictional coherence that makes Looking Glass games so beloved to this day.

LEVINE DREW INSPIRATION FROM SUBMARINE GAMES LIKE SILENT HUNTER

System Shock 2 would prove to be a passing of the torch: Looking Glass went out of business the year after its release, leaving Irrational to revive the formula with *BioShock*. The Austin office that Looking Glass had closed after *Thief* became the *Deus Ex* team. And the former members of Tribe went on to lead development of *Guitar Hero* at Harmonix, bringing the Boston music scene to an international audience after all. Looking Glass may be long dead, but as *System Shock* once proved, there's plenty the dead can still teach us. ■

Jeremy Peel

LEFT: *Thief 2*'s rooftop exploration was a key inspiration for Arkane's *Dishonored*.

BELOW: The origins of *BioShock*'s storytelling style can be seen aboard the Von Braun.

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PARK BEYOND

THERE'S GOLD IN THEM THRILLS

How Limbic Entertainment is taking the theme park sims off the rails in the best way possible.

By Adam Mathew

efore we strap in for Park Beyond, let's learn some stomach-churning facts about extreme roller coasting. This approach wouldn't be corkscrewing off on an odd tangent, either. As far as park construction goes, this management sim veers more 'loop-de-loopy' than any game that's laid new track since Chris Sawyer's tycooning years. And, though I abhor a buzzword, the prospect of Limbic Entertainment's 'Impossifciation' additive has me excited; giddier than a questionably-secured child approaching a sheer drop.

The process of providing death-adjacent amusement, both to video game NPCs and IRL people, has seen much evolution. Gone are the days when 'thrill-seekers' could be sated by a circular trot on skewered fake horsies. Since the early 1800s, punters have buckled into railed cars for a cost-efficient adrenaline fix.

And hey – speaking of parks going beyond, some of those early coasters were built as a means to beat the devil. Disgusted inventor, LaMarcus Adna Thompson, built rattlers as a means to directly compete with Coney Island's drinking and prostitution scene. Going 9 km/h in 1884 had the power to do this, apparently.

COASTING THROUGH LIFE

As we've click-clacked onward and upward through the centuries, our need for greater endorphins has escalated to sky-high heights. Figuratively and literally – in 2022 we build our coasters 130m tall, whip them up to 240 km/h and apply 4.8 Gs of force to their occupants.

That's the gravitational pull of a space shuttle launch. An Aldrin level of buzz.

Much like the ridiculous, somehow road-registerable SuperCar designs of the 1990s, however, the modern roller coaster has peaked. Fearful of litigation – or simply unable to cover the skyrocketing costs of insurance

THE PROCESS OF PROVIDING DEATH-ADJACENT AMUSEMENT, BOTH TO VIDEO GAME NPCS AND IRL PEOPLE, HAS SEEN MUCH EVOLUTION.

LEFT: The park design is utterly and beautifully OTT.

TOP: This is a theme park game that's planted firmly in the modern era of gaming graphics tech, with lush detail and intricate object models.

– real life ride designs have been reined in. It's also fair to say we've butted up against the limits of what the average, untrained human body may comfortably endure, skeletally and up-chuck-wise.

Fortunately, there's still hope for you envelope-pushers in Park Beyond. Using approachable concepts and intuitive controls not dissimilar to Frontier's Planet Coaster, you'll forge the fun-dispensing, gravity-defying carnival of your dreams. Furthermore, as you desperately try to lift a struggling park proprietor out of bankruptcy, you'll navigate story-driving, park-shaping conversations with a bunch of chatty helper-types. Better yet, after some tutorial groundwork, track girder placing and some plot grind, you'll earn access to the big marquee feature of Impossification.

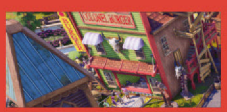
"Impossification is apparent in all different aspects of the game, from crazy coaster modules to impossified flat rides and even stretches to impossifying staff members and whole shops," explains Creative Director Johannes Reithmann. "It also brings gameplay benefits. It is a tactical choice what to impossify next and can be used, e.g. to attract more visitors to a certain shop, increase how efficient your janitors work or improve how much Fun and Amazement a ride generates."

I've not seen all the variants, but my fave 'Impossametamorphosis" is a Wonderland-esque pirate ship that can be made to defy the laws of centrifugal motion. Essentially, it'll slingshotting itself into bits, only to reattach for a perfect landing on the downswing. For his part, Reithmann says his own personal pick is the Crazy Kraken flat ride. In its final form, an animatronic leviathan scoops up visitor-manned submarines and juggles them into the air.

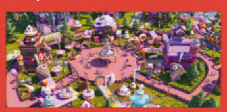
"I also love building my own, over the top coasters," Reithmann confesses. "So, I am a big fan of the

WHEN NPCS GET NEEDY

Become lost in the churn, be surrounded by chunder.



STUDIOUSLY OBSERVE
Park Beyond lets you track the Needs of a group of visitors, specifically their Hunger, Thirst, Bowel requirements, Energy and Nausea stats. Ensuring the wellbeing of your visitors is an important aspect of this simulation.



BE READY TO REACT
Should some of these drop to a critical level, visitor Happiness will drop, which eventually leads to the visitor leaving your park early. Get on it! Unhappy visitors will not buy souvenirs or treats ... and yes, critical Nausea can lead to visitors puking on to the paths.

SOLVE & EVOLVE
The flow on from those problems, obviously, is a need to ensure vomit is removed, providing enough toilets, and hiring medics to treat nausea and "newphoria" – a sickness visitors get from visiting too many impossified rides in a short amount of time.

THE SHEER SPECTACLE OF IMPOSSIFIED ATTRACTIONS, COUPLED WITH AN IMPRESSIVE "IN THE THOUSANDS" PED-COUNT, AND A FREEFORM COASTER TRACK OF YOUR OWN DESIGN, CAN LOOK PRETTY AMAZING.

fork module, which allows you to build elaborate course networks in which cars are chasing each other or nearly colliding into each other before merging into a connected train again. And, as for speed, I honestly don't know how fast ours can go – the coasters I've built reached far beyond 200 km/h already, so I am curious how fast players can make theirs go!"

Once you fill a paddock or two with freaky contraptions – and do the requisite pathway linking between rides, eateries and those all important toilets – you're in for a pretty sight. The sheer spectacle of Impossified attractions, coupled with an impressive "in the thousands" ped-count, and a freeform coaster track of your own design, can look pretty amazing. That said, the preferred way to admire your creations will be the "seat of your pants" option of first-person view. Fair warning, though: I'm told the aforementioned Crazy Kraken is particularly intense. So keep a bucket handy.

Along the same line of thought, I'm also happy to report that you can take a virtual seat in one of your roller coasters – even before the game considers them "safe for NPC consumption". So if you fancy crashing in your creations, you can experience that as well.

ABOVE: Create a park with a nice balance between gentle rides and gut-churners. Or just go wild and be 100% evil. It's more fun that way.

"Riding your own coasters in VR was something we were considering early on," Reithmann says after I start daydreaming about what ifs. Sadly, he confirms that functionality is not part of the plan in the march towards release. However, the door is left ajar when he follows that statement up with Limbic's desire to "support the game after launch with new exciting content."

NOT SQUIDDING AROUND

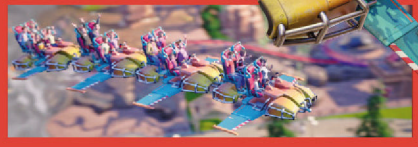
If you're dead set on building a yolo-coaster, Amazement provides

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS

Divergent objectives and creative opportunities both.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Each story mission starts with a pitch meeting in which you make choices, which then impact the mission objectives, start conditions, or lose conditions. Clearly Limbic wants to provide you a lot of freedom on defining what you want to focus on in any given mission.



BUILD YOUR OWN INSANITY

Speaking of taking different paths and exploring alternate tracks: the coaster designer includes a three-way switch track tool. With the fork or filter module you can split up your tracks and have different carts take a variety of routes. This way you can build truly crazy creations, have carts go backwards and forwards on the same track, wind tracks around each other or make course segments intersect and let carts (nearly) hit each other.

when the track tool is selected and there's a twinkle in your eye. You are not bound to the usual climbs, dips, twists and sickening helices of real-world designs, nor will you be undone by environmental barriers that thwart engineers. Lakes and pre-existing buildings can be Impossified away. Providing one carefully gauges launch/landing speeds, repurposed motorcycle ramps may be used to fling coasters, like a mine cart stunt ripped out of The Temple of Doom. Need to shotput punters farther? Upgrade that to an over-sized circus cannon.

Though it may be considered the duller side of the experience, I'm happy to see that Park Beyond is more than robust if your idea of fun is perfect budgeting and tweaking your carnival to clockwork precision. Indeed, if you're a hoarder who likes maxing out efficiency, there are plenty of win-condition currencies to chase.

"Cash, of course, is used to pay staff and to keep your shops and rides up and running," explains Reithmann. "Gathered Amazement then inspires yourself and your engineers to come up with Impossifications. To attract more visitors to your park, you want to increase your Park Appeal. One of the factors for this, is the amount of Fun visitors have when visiting your park. You can increase this by building more rides and by hiring entertainers, though you should make sure that rides which fit the demographics in your park. Choose your next attractions wisely, because attractions have their strength either in Fun, Profit or Amazement, and it ought to fit your current strategy."

Though I'm pleased to see that Park Beyond bears a deep management layer – and an estimated 30 hours story-driven campaign to onboard us – what tantalises me most is the sandbox option that follows. One particularly exciting element of that free-wheeling is Limbic bringing this old dog genre closer to the Minecraft modernisation. More specifically, the environmental concerns of diverse biomes and the delights of deformation.

"This is a full voxel world," says Reithmann. "So you are completely free to build tunnels for coasters or paths through any part of the landscape, create your own mountains, canyons or lakes. So if you want to turn your map into Swiss cheese, go for it!"

Even more encouraging, Limbic clearly understands that theme park games are played by a wide range of players, from people who love decorating every single corner of their park to minutiae management enthusiasts. The latter folks can literally agonise over the fees of each item in a shop or the salary paid to each individual staff member.

Additionally, Park Beyond offers settings to customise the play experience to the desires of different player types. You could, for example, play with an unlimited amount of money and focus on building the most beautiful park and coasters without needing to con attendees into buying your Diz-Nee Bux. On the flip-side, you could select more difficult objectives and lower starting funds to set yourself up for a true underdog challenge.

At the end of the day, it's gratifying to see that Park Beyond will bend over backwards to be the experience you and I wish it to be. Everybody is welcome – from those who have a mind to make it the Dark Souls of bean-counting and vomit-producing mayhem, or a cosmetic zhuzh-'em-up that's chiller than a carousel. I've not decided which ride I'm going to sprint to first in this regard. All I know is I'm clutching my multi-Park Beyond pass and straining eagerly against the turnstiles.

BELOW: Spectacular visual effects will delight you, but horrify the poor park attendees.

THE BIG
74
The best and brightest of a huge year for PC gaming

WORDS BY

Samantha Greer

Luke Kemp

Jeremy Peel

Robin Valentine

PREVIEW

Starfield

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Bethesda Game Studios | **PUB** Bethesda | **LINK** bethesda.net/en/game/starfield

The best bits of Bethesda RPGs don't demo well. At least, that's the self-soothing mantra I repeated while watching *Starfield*'s lacklustre summer showcase – 15 minutes of impactless shooting and Todd Howard in a leather jacket. A slight variant on *Fallout 3*'s lockpicking system wasn't enough to shake the sense that it was still 2008.

Yet the bigger picture – and it's a very big picture, comprising over 1,000 planets – offers reason for hope. This is an apparent return to *Elder Scrolls* openness, the freedom to ignore the urgency of the main plot and define yourself by which factions you join.

You're first invited to sign up to Constellation, a group of space explorers based in New Atlantis, Jemison – a capital city which resembles a cross between *Fallout 4*'s Boston and a Packard Bell computer from the '90s. In fact, many of *Starfield*'s buildings and ships have an off-white, modular look to them – part of Bethesda's NASA chic, which communicates a kind of faded space travel optimism befitting the year 2330.

Your goal as an explorer is to dig up vision-inducing artefacts, scattered across the galaxy, in order to unlock their secrets. Yet you can throw in your lot with various other groups with very different aims – like the Crimson Fleet space pirates, or libertarian Freestar Collective, the latter based on a planet terrorised by an alien predator known as the Ashta. Other worlds evoke Blade Runner's LA or South American hotel resorts, suggesting a diversity of cultures and places to make home.

Those who understandably skipped *Fallout 76* missed its highlight – an update to Bethesda's construction system that allowed you to build a base from scratch practically anywhere in its open world. *Starfield* offers the same, as well as the option to hire characters you meet to keep the place running. The biggest draw might be the chance to piece together a spaceship, and then occupy it with your crew. You'll be balancing aesthetic considerations with practical ones, since you'll need to fly the thing and fend off attacks.

SKILL SHOT

Howard says that *Starfield*'s skill tree "combines the best from our previous games" – in that new abilities are unlocked when you level up, but can be improved through repeated use out in the galaxy, in the style of *Skyrim*. Invest in Persuasion to best opponents in speech challenges, or Bargaining to buy items for cheap, or Diplomacy to force enemies to stop firing their shotguns at you for a bit. Then there are traits, which come with trade-offs. The best example we've seen so far is Kid Stuff – which automatically deducts 10% of your income to send to your parents, but also houses your mum and dad somewhere in the galaxy for you to go visit.

A KIND OF FADED SPACE TRAVEL OPTIMISM BEFITTING THE YEAR 2330

Aliens: Dark Descent

From the makers of *Battlefleet Gothic: Armada* comes another grimdark strategy game, this time with xenomorphs. You'll manage the tactics, resources and health of a squad fighting in real time across open levels.

RELEASE 2023

Hyenas

Creative Assembly's first FPS since *Alien: Isolation* takes place in space, but is otherwise a very different prospect. Compete with rival players to extract retro merch from the vaults of spaceships built for Martian billionaires.

RELEASE 2023

Kerbal Space Program 2

The smiling mascots of this space flight simulation sandbox can't conceal the launch pad drama, which has seen the project switch studios and slip from its original planned release in early 2020. Approach with caution.

RELEASE February 24, 2023

Under the Waves

The bottom of the North Sea is the perfect setting for a narrative-driven adventure about the crushing weight and isolation of grief. Pilot a submarine and swim through retrofuturistic facilities in this story backed by David Cage.

RELEASE 2023

The Great War: Western Front

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Petroglyph Games | **PUB** Frontier Foundry | **LINK** playthegreatwar.com

There's no shortage of war games waving their proverbial arms in your face and screaming "look at me, I'm *realistic*". For this game, set during the First World War, the claim seems more than just marketing blurb – the developer has even partnered with the Imperial War Museum.

Although largely a traditional RTS, *The Great War: Western Front* won't exclusively involve directing action on the battlefield. Part of the experience involves playing the part of theatre commander, managing morale and researching technology that will feed into the war. It's acting as field commander that will see you ordering units around and adapting tactics moment to moment.

Persistent battlefields present a challenge that most similar games do not. You'll deal not only with varied weather conditions, but also with environments that are torn apart by the actions of you and your enemy.

THE DEVELOPER HAS EVEN PARTNERED WITH THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Homeworld 3

With a wide variety of new ships and tactics – not to mention abandoned structures floating in space known as megaliths, which introduce brand new ambush and escape options – this just might be worth the wait.

RELEASE 2023

Tempest Rising

Nuclear war has finally happened, but don't worry; there are still plenty of troops, weaponry, and vehicles left for this RTS to set against one another, across three factions, two story campaigns, and PvP battles.

RELEASE 2023

Stormgate

This year already looks like it'll be bringing some heavy-hitting RTS games with it. What's that? You'd be interested in playing one from a studio that includes developers that worked on *StarCraft II* and *Warcraft III*? Especially if it was free? Well, it's funny you should say that actually...

Set in a post-apocalyptic future fusing elements of sci-fi and fantasy, you'll be blasting monsters with high-tech weaponry across a regularly updated campaign, alone or with up to two others. eSports are being integrated with both 1v1 and 3v3 tournaments, and – importantly – Frost Giant has committed to avoiding both play-to-win mechanics and NFTs.

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Frost Giant Studios | **PUB** Frost Giant Studios | **LINK** playstormgate.com

Company of Heroes 3

RELEASE February 23, 2023 | **DEV** Relic Entertainment | **PUB** Sega | **LINK** companyofheroes.com

You've all been waiting very patiently for this grand return – about a decade, at last count. The good news is, it looks like Relic have built a game well worth the wait.

Two full campaigns set at pivotal points of WWII – one across North Africa in the linear style of the previous games, and a more experimental Mediterranean campaign featuring a grand strategy meta-layer reminiscent of the *Total War* series – are set to keep you occupied until... well, probably until World War 3 breaks out.

The traditional destruction tech is back bigger and more blow-up-y than ever, allowing you to blast the battlefield to dirt and splinters as you skirmish across it. Satisfying, but also strategic – destroying features creates new areas of cover or open ground, and a pummeled building can even collapse onto troops inside.

At launch you'll be able to play as the USA, the British, and Germany. Ground, air, and sea forces will be available, and if the RT is messing with your S, you'll be able to use tactical pauses to take a breath and queue up actions – making this perhaps the most accessible entry in the series yet. Though that's not an option in the 2-8 player PvP matches, of course...

Modders rejoice! Day one support has been confirmed to help create and share new maps, modes, and more. Your heroic work should find itself in good company. Ahem.

Minecraft Legends

Minecraft has lots of lore nowadays, and that's always a good excuse for death on a mass scale. Cue this 'action strategy' game with both PvE and PvP that tasks you with saving the Overworld.

RELEASE 2023

Men of War 2

With a wide variety of units, a detailed campaign, and both co-op and PvP options for multiplayer, *Men of War* is planning to come back with a literal bang. Mod support has already been announced.

RELEASE 2023

2023 PREVIEW

Final Fantasy XVI

The latest entry in the never-ending series takes players to a medieval fantasy world where kingdoms use big crystals and the summoning of weird monsters to maintain their power.

Cue our protagonist...Clive. Huh. A very normal name for a dude in a *Final Fantasy* videogame. Anyway, he's on a quest for revenge which will see him through what appears to be a grimdark take on your usual *Final Fantasy* affair, channelling some of the grit and self-seriousness of *The Witcher* or Game of Thrones.

It's coming to PS5 in June, but a PC release date is yet to be announced, so we may have a longer wait ahead of us.

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Square Enix | **PUB** Square Enix | **LINK** na.finalfantasyxvi.com

Street Fighter 6

RELEASE June 2, 2023 | **DEV** Capcom | **PUB** Capcom | **LINK** streetfighter.com/6/en-us

Street Fighter is back in its best shape in some time, sporting a big roster and tight yet accessible mechanics that should land with series stalwarts and new fans alike.

The single-player World Tour mode lets you explore an open world called Metro City. You create your own fighter, and explore the streets, fighting and training with Ryu, Chun-Li, and the rest of the crew.

Don't expect *GTA* with fireballs, but it certainly seems more ambitious and exciting than *Street Fighter V's* limp story mode, evoking the modernising spirit of another recent Capcom hit, *Monster Hunter World*.

An optional "modern" control style gives new players a friendlier way into the game, allowing you to use simpler inputs and perform combos much more easily. You'll be a bit more limited and predictable than players using classic controls, ensuring competitive balance, but it looks like a great set of training wheels in a series that's long been intimidating.

The big change to the core fighting is the drive gauge, serving as a new form of super meter. It starts the match full, and can be spent to parry, dash cancel, power up your specials, and more. You lose it when blocking, and gain it by attacking – even if your attack is blocked – encouraging fighters to stay on the offensive. It certainly seems like it should shake up a series that's long featured cagey play and cautious 'footsies'.

Returnal

This slick roguelike from bullet hell masters Housemarque is escaping the confines of PlayStation exclusivity to come to PC early in 2023. A surreal sci-fi story and tense, satisfying combat make this one to watch.

RELEASE Early 2023

Solium Infernum

The cult classic multiplayer turn-based strategy game – played over weeks of diplomacy, warfare, and back-stabbing – is getting a full, modern remake from the studio behind *Armello*. Battling to rule Hell never looked so good.

RELEASE 2023

AS THE PARTY LEAVES TO EXPLORE LANDS BEYOND THE BORDERS OF MIDGAR

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

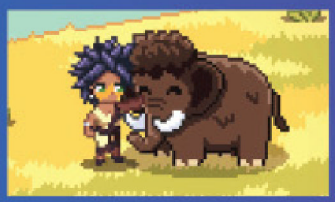
RELEASE Winter 2023 | **DEV** Square Enix | **PUB** Square Enix | **LINK** square-enix-games.com

The *Final Fantasy VII* remake saga continues in *Rebirth*, following a story that, at this point, has diverged significantly from the path of the original game. Where those new threads lead is tantalisingly difficult to say – but at the very least, this game will have to find its own version of the original's grand opening up of the world, as the party leaves to explore lands beyond the borders of Midgar. Weirdly, creative director Tetsuya Nomura claims you won't even need to have played the first remake or the original to understand this one. We're not so sure about that...

Roots of Pacha

This *Stardew Valley*-like farm sim stands out from the crowd with its prehistoric setting, and while that means learning to survive without the conveniences of modern agriculture, the experience is markedly intuitive and accessible.

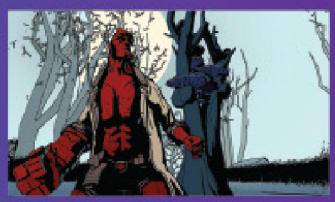
RELEASE 2023



Hellboy Web of Wyrd

Lance Reddick voices the iconic monster-hunting half-demon for a roguelike action-adventure that beautifully translates the art style of the comics. The story was even created in partnership with creator Mike Mignola.

RELEASE TBC



THE NEW VISUALS TAKE SOME GETTING USED TO HOWEVER, DOING AWAY WITH THE ICONIC SEPIA TONE IN FAVOUR OF A MORE VIBRANT ENVIRONMENT

Alan Wake 2

Gaming's wife guy returns. Aside from hints in *Control's* DLC that confirmed the two games share a universe, we don't have much to go on yet – though at the very least it's clearly still committed to the art of FMV.

RELEASE 2023

Remnant 2

Remnant: From the Ashes was a quietly brilliant take on multiplayer lootin' and shootin', so this sequel is very welcome. Once again we'll be hopping between different horrible, post-apocalyptic realities and fighting monstrous bosses.

RELEASE TBC

Resident Evil 4

RELEASE March 24, 2023 | **DEV** Capcom | **PUB** Capcom | **LINK** residentevil.com

After the *Resident Evil 2* and *3* remakes, the legendary fourth game is getting the same treatment, reimagining the lauded classic as something shinier and faster paced. Having survived the events of Raccoon City, Leon Kennedy is now (the game takes place in the year 2004) tasked with rescuing the U.S president's daughter from a cult in remote Spain. Thus begins a horror action adventure that's like few others.

Based on recent hands-on time, the game doesn't deviate much from the original, focused more on adding new bells and whistles than messing with the core formula. It's the kind of polish that Capcom makes look effortless these days. You have the ability to move and shoot, crowds are denser, and there are more interactions between enemies and the environments – like when the chainsaw wielding Dr Salvador cuts down buildings to block your escape.

All of it seamlessly blends into the original design. You don't have Jill Valentine's slick dodge, but you can still roundhouse kick whole groups of enemies if you can stun just one of them, so even as the remake tries to overwhelm you, you're still capable of turning the odds in your favour with a little bit of timing and good aim.

SNEAK PERFORMANCE

Even with the addition of some simple stealth mechanics, letting you quietly take out a few foes before a set piece kicks off, the original's tension remains intact. You are making one fraught decision after another, not planning a perfect run so much as scrambling against impossible odds. Of all the changes, the inclusion of new counter moves, letting you defend from attacks at the last minute, is possibly the most exciting, because it should reshape some of the iconic boss encounters.

The new visuals take some getting used to however, doing away with the iconic sepia tone in favour of a more vibrant environment. It's still gloomy but feels much less barren. All-new animations work to give Leon even more character, and you can still somersault out of windows, albeit without the cool low angle camera switch.

We're yet to see how much later sections of the game will deviate from the original game, though trailers definitely indicate some story beats will play out quite differently – for example, Ashley seems to be getting a more central role. But don't worry, it doesn't seem to have ditched the penchant for cheesy one-liners.

It's not easy to remake a classic, especially one that still holds up almost 20 years later – but with everything Capcom's learned from bringing back 2 and 3, it seems in the position to do right by it. Even if it doesn't measure up to the original, expect this to be one of the best action games of 2023.

The Last Case of Benedict Fox

Dive into the memories of the dead in this self-proclaimed "Lovecraftian Metroidvania", as you strive to unravel occult mysteries and foil the plans of sinister secret societies.

RELEASE 2023

Silent Hill 2

Remaking one of the most lauded games of all time is bold, and Bloober's track record doesn't inspire confidence. Still, if it's bad, at least there are two new *Silent Hill* games on the way too. One of them's got to be good... right?

RELEASE 2023

Assassin's Creed Mirage

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Ubisoft Bordeaux | **PUB** Ubisoft | **LINK** ubisoft.com/en-us/game/assassins-creed/mirage

If you think you want a remake of the original *Assassin's Creed*, then time has softened your memory of its mindnumbingly repetitive structure and arbitrary, flag-chasing investigations.

Mirage is the better option: a return to stealth, urban parkour, and the Middle East that folds in the more sophisticated mechanics and storytelling of the series as we know it today – embodied by protagonist Basim, formerly a supporting character in *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*.

Expect a focus on targeted murder over RPG-style adventure, enabled by a clue-gathering phase and the busiest toolbelt an assassin has ever had. Ubi's found room for some blatant noughties nostalgia, too – you'll flit between Assassin's bureaus, as Altaïr once did, and even visit a mountain fortress in the mode of Masyaf. This one's based on a real-life Iranian ruin called Alamut, which means "eagle's nest".

MIRAGE IS THE BETTER OPTION: A RETURN TO STEALTH, URBAN PARKOUR, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Star Wars Jedi: Survivor

Set five years after the events of *Fallen Order*, this sequel finds Cal Kestis beaten down by life as a fugitive Jedi. Respawn has dropped support for last-gen consoles, and leaned into tech like real-time ray tracing.

RELEASE March 17, 2023

Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora

Nestled amid the upcoming Avatar sequels, this standalone story turns an undiscovered part of the titular moon into an open world, and aims to capture the vibrancy of the blue-niverse in first-person.

RELEASE 2023/2024

Skull and Bones

Another throwback to an early period in *Assassin's Creed*'s evolution, *Skull and Bones* has had a much longer and stormier journey than *Mirage*. Intended to expand on the celebrated ship combat and ocean exploration of *Black Flag*, it's previously been a session-based team shooter and a *Rust*-style survival game. Now it's more akin to *Sea of Thieves* – an open world in which the Indian Ocean is shared by 20 players, each taking on contracts to transport contraband or track down treasure, with the aim of achieving greater infamy and captaining bigger ships. Before finally, of course, sinking each others' ships.

RELEASE March 9, 2023 | **DEV** Ubisoft Singapore | **PUB** Ubisoft | **LINK** ubisoft.com/en-us/game/skull-and-bones

Flintlock: The Siege of Dawn

RELEASE Early 2023 | **DEV** A44 Games | **PUB** Kepler Interactive | **LINK** playflintlock.com

The success of *Dark Souls* and *Elden Ring* flew in the face of received AAA wisdom – proving that big budget games can be difficult, obtuse, and trusting of their players, yet still find a huge audience. *Flintlock* is an early result of that new understanding – a story-driven open world of the sort you might associate with Sony, but anchored by a brutal *Souls*-like combat system.

You play as Nor, an explosives expert on the frontline of a war against the gods humanity once worshipped. These former deities have opened the door to the afterlife, which, like a vacuum cleaner stuck on reverse flow, is now spewing an army of the undead into the world of the living. Following a bitter initial defeat, you must travel the world to reassemble the Blackstream sappers – masters of gunpowder in a strange and intriguing setting where Napoleonic weaponry is brought to bear on creatures of myth.

Nor's secret weapon is Enki, a cat-like companion and trickster god. Out in the open world, he's a fancy fast travel system – carrying Nor through the air between nodes at high speed, a method of traversal that will require some skill to master. And during battle he trips and taunts enemies, as well as firing off ultimates stolen from the gods you've defeated. His presence brings a welcome cheekiness to a land that might otherwise overwhelm you with existential horror.

Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

A zero-to-hero story from the makers of *Nioh*, *Wo Long* follows a militia soldier in the dying days of China's Later Han Dynasty. The history books don't mention the demons, which you'll fend off with precise swordplay.

RELEASE March 3, 2023

Tortuga: A Pirate's Tale

Thwart the great European powers in hexagonal, turn-based tactical battles across the 17th century Caribbean. If you're to stay above-water, you'll need to fit your fleet appropriately for battle and pay attention to rough sea conditions.

RELEASE Early 2023

Atlas Fallen

The world of *Atlas Fallen* is ruled over by a cruel god, who demands that its people harvest and offer up 'essence' to it. The gauntlet which rather unexpectedly starts talking to you has other ideas. Turns out its plan involves repeatedly whacking giant monsters with shapeshifting weapons, either alone or with a friend.

Traversal looks fun, incorporating what can only be described as sandsurfing. Combat meanwhile is fast and flashy, with a momentum system that rewards relentless attacks with powerful moves, at the cost of increased damage from your enemy. This sandy adventure could turn out to be a glass act.

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Deck13 | **PUB** Focus Entertainment | **LINK** focus-entmt.com/en/games/atlas-fallen

Diablo 4

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Blizzard | **PUB** Blizzard | **LINK** diablo4.blizzard.com/en-us

Regardless of whether you've been looking forward to this for the last three years or not, we can surely all agree that a game where one of the characters can turn into a bear is worth a second look. It's been a while, but it's almost time to return to the somewhat inappropriately named land of Sanctuary.

It's going to be the grim, loot-tastic *Diablo* ARPG experience fans know and love (to be disturbed by), but there will be changes. Customisation features are being expanded, for example; individual armour pieces can be dyed, and you'll be able to mould character faces to your liking. In terms of direct effects on gameplay, there will be three new stats: angelic, demonic, and ancestral power. Angelic power dictates the duration of positive effects, demonic power the duration of negative effects, and ancestral power the chance of an effect being triggered on hit.

The five confirmed character classes are barbarian (hefty melee fighter), druid (the one with the aforementioned bear ability; he can also transform into a werewolf), necromancer (summon the undead to your aid), sorcerer (wielder of elemental magic), and rogue (fast, agile, and effective at a variety of ranges). Controversially, you won't be able to play without an active internet connection, but crossplay does at least mean that you can grumble about this alongside any friends you have playing on console.

Witchfire

With more than a vague whiff of *Doom* about it, this is a game that hopes to scratch your fast-paced FPS itch. The combination of guns and magic, if done right, should make for intense combat, and it's got a great grimdark look.

RELEASE 2023

Lies of P

A grim steampunk soulslike (very very) loosely based on the story of Pinnochio? Sure, why not. Pinnochio can mod his body, and the lies you tell during the story will dictate which ending you see. No nose-based combo attacks, sadly.

RELEASE 2023

WILD HEARTS CARRIES THE EA ORIGINALS TAG, BUT IS BEING DEVELOPED BY KOEI TECMO

Wild Hearts

RELEASE February 16, 2023 | **DEV** KOEI TECMO | **PUB** Electronic Arts | **LINK** ea.com

Lush environments, fantastical creatures that can be harvested for loot, enormous beasts that are best tackled in a small team... it's easy to compare this to *Monster Hunter*, with good reason. Capcom's series is a clear inspiration. If all goes according to plan, however, this will do more than enough to emerge as a distinctly unique experience.

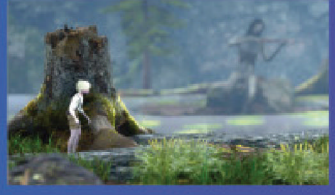
Wild Hearts carries the EA Originals tag, but is being developed by Koei Tecmo, which hurts my head a bit. Regardless of who's publishing who, the land of Azuma is crawling with beasts known as the Kemono. It's the wide range of ancient tech, known as Karakuri, that is key to carving out an identity for *Wild Hearts*.

Players will be able to craft gadgets that will allow them to sail through the air, whizz along the ground, light dark areas, harvest resources, trap or damage enemies, and much more. New Karakuri are unlocked as you defeat new beasts, encouraging you to, um, monster hunt.

Bramble: The Mountain King

Nordic folklore is the fuel for this adventure. Your character is dwarfed by his surroundings, lending the game some *Little Nightmares* vibes – and there's a similarly creepy edge to it.

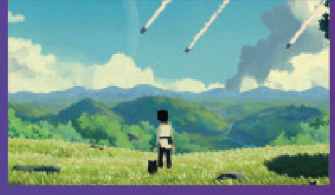
RELEASE 2023



Planet of Lana

This puzzle-platformer has a lot going for it. Lovely art, strange creatures, creepy robots, and some kind of magic... cat? The mystical moggy (or whatever) will accompany you throughout, as you set out on a vital rescue mission.

RELEASE Summer 2023



Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League

RELEASE May 26, 2023 | **DEV** Rocksteady Studios | **PUB** Warner Bros. Games | **LINK** suicidesquadgame.com

As the Gotham Knights fumbled their catch of the DC team-up ball, it's up to the Suicide Squad to pick up and run with this metaphor that should have ended several words ago. Interestingly, this game follows neither the movies (not the well-received James Gunn one, or the one with Jared Leto's 'Ooh, I'm mad, me' Joker), nor the comics. It's going to tell its own story, with its own version of the Squad.

Amanda Waller has let the Suicide Squad run loose in Metropolis. Why? Because international baddie Brainiac is having a crack at invading Earth. Not only does this mean giant metal tentacles and lots of purple, it also means mind control, including the superpowered Justice League falling under his control. Good news for us; it means we get to kick the crap out of the good guys for once.

The Squad has been through multiple lineups across various media, but here it consists of Harley Quinn, Deadshot, King Shark, and Captain Boomerang. Mr Boomerang, in fact, is an interesting declaration of independence for the game. While he is the original version of the character in name, ie George Harkness (as seen in the movies), in the game he has superspeed powers that, in the source material, were exhibited only by his son (and successor). This is a version of the character not seen anywhere else before.

SQUAD GAME

Metropolis is an open world, meaning that the fearsome foursome are sure to have plenty of side activities to occupy themselves with when they're not hammering heroes together. And they will always be together. Unlike *Gotham Knights*, the four characters don't split up (probably because they're such good friends!). That's one character each for co-op, while solo players will have the ability to switch between them at will.

HARLEY EVER

Gameplay has at time of writing only been shown in a series of bite-size pieces, but customisable weapons have been confirmed. Despite being developed by Rocksteady, this will be nothing like the *Arkham* games. Footage released has shown Deadshot raining down death from above while flying a jetpack, Captain Boomerang teleporting short distances, Harley Quinn engaging in some extremely athletic combat, and King Shark running up the side of a building in the way that sharks don't.

There seems to be little danger of each member feeling like the same character with a different skin. While Captain Boomerang has his speed bursts and Deadshot has his jetpack, Harley has a grapple that allows her to swing around Spider-Man style, and King Shark... well, he's a shark with legs, the fact he can move around at all is impressive. He can come crashing down from on high for an AoE attack, though, and he can also whip out a minigun for a bit of good old-fashioned carnage.

The trailers have demonstrated a good understanding of the humour and violence that fuel the Suicide Squad, and the developer has proven its ability to successfully adapt the DC universe. Fingers crossed this one doesn't self-destruct.

Snufkin: Melody of Moominvalley

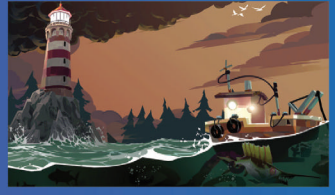
Described as a "musical adventure game", the wonderful hand-drawn appearance and wry sense of humour suggest an appeal wider than you might at first expect.

RELEASE 2023

Dredge

Take your upgradeable trawler out to sea, catch some fish, and sell them to the inhabitants of the surrounding islands. Sounds chill, right? It is; until you discover what comes out at night... This indie's thick atmosphere charmed us at preview.

RELEASE 2023



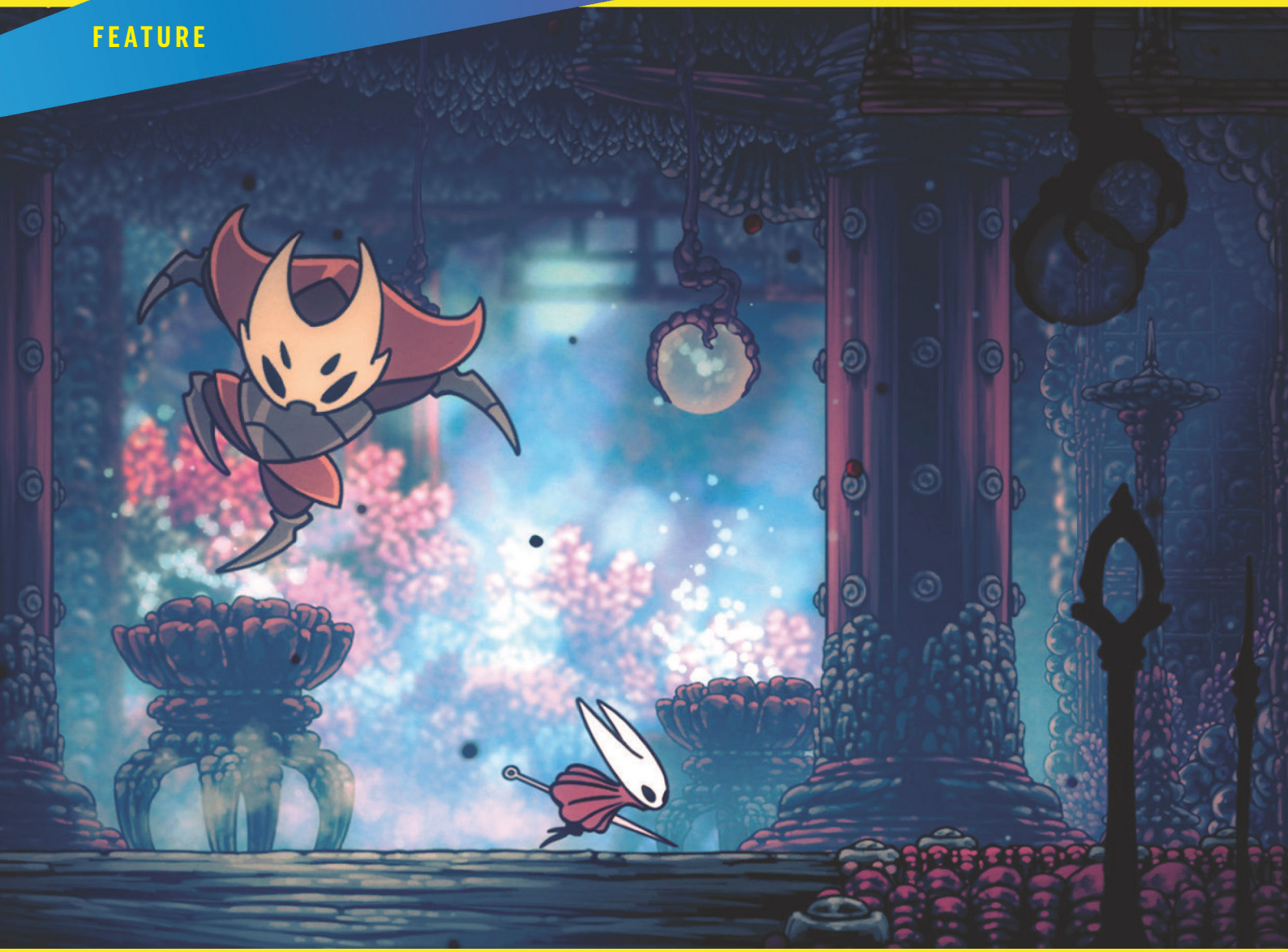
GOOD NEWS FOR US; IT MEANS WE GET TO KICK THE CRAP OUT OF THE GOOD GUYS FOR ONCE

Ravenlok
This screams 'late 1990s 3D action game', but in a good way. Featuring a colourful fantasy land, plenty of whacking things with a sword, and intricately designed creatures, they do still make them like this.

RELEASE Early 2023

Shadows of Doubt
An open world crime-riddled city where you play a private detective. Perhaps best described as sci-fi noir, this is an incredibly ambitious digital sandbox that promises a fully explorable world and painstaking attention to detail.

RELEASE 2023



Hollow Knight: Silksong

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Team Cherry | **PUB** Team Cherry | **LINK** hollowknightsilksong.com

This sequel to the beloved, hand drawn hack and slash platformer is as highly anticipated as it gets. Set in a fantasy world inhabited by (adorable) bugs, this delightfully gloomy adventure evokes *Dark Souls* in its structure of safe points, boss fights, and unlockable shortcuts.

Building on the original with a new protagonist, Hornet, it brings fresh fluid movement to the format with the character's graceful gliding and sliding thanks to her ability to weave threads of silk (hence the title). There's a real heft to her animations in spite of how speedy she is.

Rather than a journey into the deep, Hornet is on a quest to the kingdom's peak, battling various imaginative foes en route through a dense, metroidvania world. With visual splendour in spades, *Silksong* is set to be one of the year's most eye catching games, and with the proven pedigree of the first game under its belt, expect it to be a completely absorbing adventure too.

RATHER THAN A JOURNEY INTO THE DEEP, HORNET IS ON A QUEST TO THE KINGDOM'S PEAK

Mask of the Rose

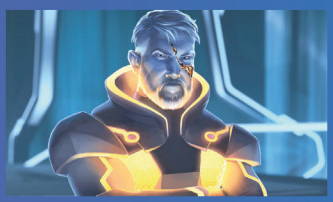
Failbetter Games return to the macabre world of *Fallen London* with *Mask of the Rose*, a romance and detective visual novel with the studio's signature wit on full display. You can date a squid man. So that's good.

RELEASE April 2023

Tron Identity

A visual novel in which you play the program QUERY, searching for a stolen valuable in the Tron universe. If it's like the studio's narrative adventures, *Subsurface Circular* and *Quarantine Circular*, it'll be a good yarn.

RELEASE 2023



Teslagrad 2

A decade since the first game, this grogeous looking platformer puts players in the role of Lumina, a young 'Teslamancer', who has been left stranded after her airship crashed. To get her back home to safety, you'll have to explore a massive mechanical tower, battle some intimidating Viking enemies and bosses, and solve plenty of puzzles. All of it is wrapped up in a painterly art style that brings its Scandinavian-steampunk infused world to life. Its brain-teasers are all based on real electromagnetic physics, playing into the scientific themes. Though that does mean you will, in fact, need to know how magents work – including, apparently, "curved magnets".

RELEASE Spring 2023 | **DEV** Rain Games | **PUB** Modus Games | **LINK** store.steampowered.com/app/1698220/Teslagrad_2

The Invincible

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Starward Industries | **PUB** 11 Bit Studios | **LINK** invinciblethegame.com

This retro-future science-fiction game, based on a novel of the same name, looks like it could be a serious sleeper hit next year. Boasting exquisite visual design, with loads of detailed, analogue props, it invites players into a mystery on a remote world, Aegis III, in the space boots of Yasna, an astrobiologist out to search for her lost crewmates. A narrative focused first-person adventure, you'll be tackling heady cosmic themes by figuring out how to use an arsenal of science gadgets, all exquisitely animated with chunky interfaces. There's something a little reminiscent of *Alien Isolation* or *Observation* to it – dense sci-fi with tactile interaction.

How much you like the sound of poking around dusty exosolar caverns using an electron spectrometer for clues will determine how much this game is for you. Though there are also robotic threats out in the world, all shiny B-movie chrome, so this isn't a gentle little mystery adventure either and the stakes are clearly high for Yasna. However, this isn't a shooter or action game, because you'll be dealing with problems using your brain and not your trigger finger.

Thoughtful hard sci-fi games are thin on the ground, let alone ones with such a polished execution, and *The Invincible* has all the makings of a very special game for the genre buffs out there.

The Expanse: A Telltale Series

Telltale games return in some form with *The Expanse*, giving us a prequel to the TV series (based on the novels) starring space goth queen Camina Drummer as she finds her footing.

RELEASE 2023

Star Trek Resurgence

An interactive narrative game set in the Star Trek, post-The Next Generation universe (hence those cool uniforms) where you control two characters, a first officer and engineer ensign, as they seek to uncover a mystery.

RELEASE April 2023

Terra Nil

The citybuilder, as first established by Will Wright, was about taking a green Californian field and turning it into a fume-belching industrial hellscape. It's a premise that's rather lost its feel-good factor in our environmentally conscious age, and even direct successors like *Cities: Skylines* have leaned into geothermal power plants and electric cars. *Terra Nil* flips the concept entirely, asking you to restore a blackened wasteland to its former natural glory. Purify the soil, grow coral reefs, and introduce parrots, fish and flamingos. Then recycle all your buildings, and leave the map looking as if you were never there at all.

RELEASE Early 2023 | **DEV** Free Lives | **PUB** Devolver Digital | **LINK** devolverdigital.com/games/terra-nil

Nightingale

RELEASE TBC | **DEV** Inflexion Games | **PUB** Inflexion Games | **LINK** playnightingale.com

Onetime Bioware boss Aaryn Flynn is the persistent force behind *Nightingale*, a survival and crafting game that goes unusually deep when it comes to worldbuilding. You are one of many refugees locked out of the titular Victorian city when its magical portal network collapsed, and now lost in the fae realms – a practically infinite set of procedural worlds populated by goblin-esque 'bound' and oversized boss monsters. Thankfully the realms of this 'gaslamp fantasy' universe are rich in resources too, and you're encouraged to find a foothold by building a fortified manor – in whatever spot takes your fancy, and perhaps in the Tudor style, if that's your thing.

Originally designed to take advantage of cloud technology, though now functioning without it, *Nightingale*'s realms can be connected together by multiple portals – so that enterprising players can daisy chain several maps together, creating trade routes to fund their floating umbrellas, flintlock weapons, and zeppelins. The ultimate goal, if you choose to engage with it, is returning to Nightingale. The city is expected to show up several seasons into Early Access – as both a *Destiny*-style social hub, and a focal point for quest-giving factions. The latter are where you're most likely to see the Bioware DNA – though storytelling is only intended to flavour the action, rather than drive it. If you're a *Fallout 76* apologist, or tired of empty *DayZ* towns, you might find a lot to love here.

Lightyear Frontier

Aimed firmly at the Venn diagram intersection where fans of mechs and *Stardew Valley* meet, *Lightyear Frontier* is a peaceful farming adventure set on a distant planet. Steer a bipedal tractor as you fertilise alien crops.

RELEASE Spring 2023

Ark 2

After birthing multiple spin-offs, the breakout dinosaur survival game is finally hatching a proper sequel – somehow starring longtime game enthusiast Vin Diesel as a prehistoric papa. His presence suggests a new focus on solo storytelling.

RELEASE 2023

STALKER 2

RELEASE December 2023 | **DEV** GSC Game World | **PUB** GSC Game World | **LINK** stalker2.com

STALKER was the original open world FPS and once wowed us with its unscripted skirmishes and distinctly Ukrainian brand of horror. The likes of *Far Cry* have since made its innovations commonplace, but the reformation of GSC Game World is nonetheless a notable event, and *STALKER 2* an enticing prospect.

Since the studio is based in Kyiv, work on the sequel has been derailed by the war there. "Now we are striving to help our employees and their families to survive," GSC said in March, as Russian troops massed outside the Ukrainian capital. "The game development shifted to the sidelines." Miraculously, however, progress has since resumed in Prague.

Much of the team's effort has been devoted to making *STALKER 2*'s exclusion zone not only huge and seamless, but a true simulation too. You'll share the irradiated air with individuals from various factions, as well as mutants, all of whom will interact whether you're nearby or not.

SINCE THE STUDIO IS BASED IN KYIV, WORK ON THE SEQUEL HAS BEEN DERAILED BY THE WAR THERE

Lord of the Rings: Return to Moria

In the hearteningly specific premise for this Middle-earth survival and crafting game, Gimli asks you to reclaim Moria for the dwarves. Beware: the clatter of pickaxes awakens creatures in the deep.

RELEASE 2023

Park Beyond

The studio behind *Tropico 6* dares to try and break Frontier's stranglehold on the theme park building genre. *Park Beyond* rejects the engineered realism of *Planet Coaster* in favour of physics-defying 'impossification'.

RELEASE 2023

Bomb Rush Cyberfunk

RELEASE Summer 2023 | **DEV** Team Reptile | **PUB** Team Reptile | **LINK** team-reptile.com

A blatant spiritual successor to *Jet Set Radio*, Bomb Rush Cyberfunk embodies the style and pace of the classic skating game, but puts more emphasis on player expression. You choose your character, customise your outfits, and create your own graffiti in an open world city.

You won't just be rollerblading – you can hop on a skateboard and a trick bike too. And, of course, there's a full trick system for putting all three to work with grinds, slides, wall-runs, and all sorts of other fancy motions my old thumbs probably won't be able to pull off.

Style is all-important – you're not just showing off, you're gaining a reputation. Get well-known enough in each district, and you can challenge its ruling gang for control of the territory. All rather more civilised than guns and knives, I'm sure you'll agree.

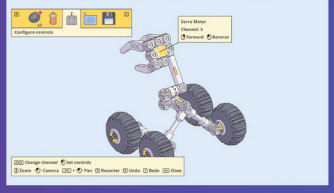
And let's be honest with ourselves: the main thing is it's got easily the coolest name of any game coming in 2023. That counts for a lot in our book.

GET WELL-KNOWN ENOUGH IN EACH DISTRICT AND YOU CAN CHALLENGE ITS RULING GANG FOR CONTROL

Mars First Logistics

Design and build your own Mars rovers for transporting cargo in this physics driven game with a neat, simple cel shaded style. There's even co-op so you can put those beautiful/horrific creations side by side.

RELEASE 2023



Hades II

Indie superstar studio Supergiant has announced its first ever sequel – though perhaps it was inevitable given the huge success of the first game. The new star is a female hero based on the mythical figure Melinoë – Zagreus' sister?

RELEASE TBC

Hyper Light Breaker

A new game set in the post apocalyptic world of *Hyper Light Drifter*, taking the series into 3D with a rogue-lite adventure that can be played cooperatively with friends. You've got swordplay, platforming, and hover-boards coming together into the mix of its iconic fantasy and sci-fi aesthetics. It seems much more high energy than the decidedly melancholy vibes of the original, however.

The studio's last game, *Solar Ash*, did fumble the move to 3D a bit, impressing visually but not quite delivering mechanically. Here's hoping *Hyper Light Breaker* fares better.

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Heart Machine | **PUB** Gearbox Publishing | **LINK** hyperlightbreaker.com/en

Redfall

RELEASE 2023 | **DEV** Arkane Austin | **PUB** Bethesda | **LINK** bethesda.net/en/game/redfall

Arkane enters the fray of cooperative shooters, with a vampiric twist. The genre has become a little more crowded with 2022 having brought us *Back 4 Blood* and the sublime *Warhammer 40,000 Darktide*, but *Redfall* has a few extra tricks up its sleeves to potentially help it sink its fangs into the competition.

It's an open world for one, letting up to four players explore the titular town of Redfall, Massachusetts to hunt down the undead. Each playable character has unique abilities and gear, with customisable loadouts, and the mix of powers looks to bring Arkane's immersive sim credentials into the mix, combining the *Left 4 Dead* formula with the more open problem solving of something like *Dishonored*. Hopefully that leads to dynamic vampire hunting, rather than just a lot of crawling through vents. Certainly what it does mean is lots of stealth – you're encouraged to pick enemies off rather than blasting away.

While the characters are a bit too quippy to allow the game to be spooky, there's definitely an atmospheric setting here that intrigues. It looks dense, detailed, and if it's even an ounce as compelling as the spaces of *Dishonored*, it will definitely have an edge over its genre mates. There's also a story to follow, perhaps uncovering the origins of these vampires born of science experiments gone wrong. They never do go right in games, do they?

Skate Story

Fighting through hell is so last year, 2023 is all about skating through the underworld, as is the case in this glittering, surreal skateboard game. To call the visuals arresting would be a serious understatement.

RELEASE 2023

Stray Blade

A *Souls*-like fantasy RPG distinguishing itself with a colourful world, the inclusion of a furry little companion to help you battle through a mysterious valley, and the promise of a world that's ever changing as you progress.

RELEASE 2023

HORDE MODE

Fight hundreds of alien monsters at once in the bigger, meaner **SPACE MARINE 2**

By Samantha Greer

W*arhammer 40K: Space Marine* has a cult following almost as devoted as the game's zealots, and those poor loyalists have been waiting a decade for a sequel to the hack-and-slashing third person shooter. As the faithful no doubt knew all along, the time is finally upon us, and *Space Marine 2* is set to deliver unto thee a scale never before seen in the series. But how will it fare against the new wave of Warhammer games, especially the likes of *Darktide*?

To get a sense of how the sequel is shaping up, I sat down to speak with creative director Oliver Hollis-Leick, who was more than happy to dive into how they aim to build upon the original, and what's special about telling stories in the Warhammer 40K setting. "What's most important about this universe is that it's epic," Oliver tells me up front. "Wars don't take place in cities or countries, they take place on planets, solar systems, and even local groups of stars. So what we want is for the player to feel embedded in one of those great Warhammer 40K wars."

A BUG'S DEATH

Bigger, is definitely the key word. Bigger than its genre brethren, and bigger than its predecessor, promising hundreds of foes on screen as the sequel confronts returning protagonist Titus with waves and waves of the bug-like tyranids. "We have our own proprietary engine at Saber which allowed us to do things in *World War Z* that you couldn't get from any other engine, things like 500 enemies on screen at the same time. Without compromising the graphics." *Space Marine 2* is delivering on that same front, throwing massive alien armies at your chunky warrior. It's truly a sight to behold, and reminds me of the era when games like *Ninety Nine Nights* were a thing, putting loads of lads on screen in a bid to

PLAYERS CAN LOOK FORWARD TO WIELDING A MORE DIVERSE ARSENAL OF ICONIC WEAPONRY

LEFT: In the world of Warhammer 40K, if you don't wear at least two skulls, people laugh at you behind your back.

TOP: Time for a bit of pest control, I think.

capture the feel of the battles from The Lord of the Rings films. "Our engine has allowed us to give an authentic Warhammer experience with hundreds, if not thousands, of enemy tyranids assaulting you and your allies. This war isn't just taking place in front of you but all the way up to the horizon."

All those enemies wouldn't be quite as impressive if they were just part of the background, but you really are in there carving through them with a big chainsword. Continuing the tradition of the first game, which eschewed cover in favour of rampant aggression, *Space Marine 2* will have you sprinting and swinging through these armies, up close and personal. "The first game was very popular because of its avoidance of using things like cover systems, in fact the player was incentivised to always be attacking. We've definitely remained true to those popular mechanics and we've tried to, where possible, add additional incentives." Players can look forward to wielding a more diverse arsenal of iconic weaponry from brutal chainswords and thunder hammers to devastating boltguns and plasma rifles.

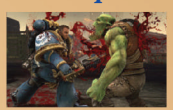
SPACE TO GROW

As well as bringing back the style of shooter that earned the original game such a following, *Space Marine 2* continues the story of main character Titus. "At the end of the first game Titus was arrested by the Inquisition and taken away, probably for interrogation. I mean, anyone who knows anything about the Inquisition knows that they are ruthless in their methods." Oliver encourages players to use their imagination to picture everything Titus might have been through between games, but does say that some hints of exactly what occurred can be seen. "People found it [in our trailer], that Titus now wears an Inquisition symbol on a chain around his forearm."

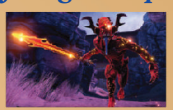
It's not just Titus who's a little different these days. If anything, he's not changed nearly as much as the world around him as *Space Marine 2*

BLASTS IN THE PAST

Catch up on the first game's plot



1 Titus was sent to retake control of an important Forge World (where they build stuff) from ork forces.



2 Inquisitor Drogan recruited him to activate a special weapon – but it went wrong, and opened a portal to hell.

3 But this was deliberate, because Dragon was possessed by the forces of Chaos all along!

4 Titus wins, and discovers a natural immunity to Chaos energy, which draws the suspicion of the inquisition...

"IT'S ABOUT A HERO WHO HAS RETURNED HOME TO FIND HIS HOME HAS CHANGED QUITE DRAMATICALLY"

reflects various larger events in the 40K setting – something that Oliver and the team have made an essential part of the story. "We can see from the service studs on his head that many, many decades have passed. A lot in the universe has changed." Oliver talks about the destruction of Cadia, an important planet for the Imperium of Man which was destroyed by the forces of Chaos. The result is a great storm in space that divides the empire in two. Desperate times for humanity. "In their darkest hour the Imperium were able to resurrect one of the primarchs, Roboute Guilliman. One of the most powerful figures in the universe and the leader of the Ultramarines." Something which will have a personal effect on Titus, who was challenged and ultimately arrested for his interpretation of the space marines' laws, the Codex Astartes, a tome written by none other than Guilliman. "Now the author has returned, so what does that mean for Titus? How are his views and opinions interpreted?"

ABOVE: *Space Marine 2* wants to throw hundreds, possibly thousands, of enemies at players

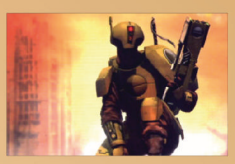
Titus will also have to contend with young blood as he is slowly becoming a relic of the past. His ranks have been superseded by the Primaris Marines, bigger and more powerful upgrades. "Titus is not one of them and so he's been converted to a Primaris, he's had to go through agonising surgery to do so. And so for me, the story is about how does Titus deal with his past? How has his journey affected him? How is he going to reintegrate into a very different Imperium, and how is this veteran space marine going to fight alongside much younger, Primaris Marines? So it's about a hero who has returned home to find his home has changed quite dramatically."

ARE WE THE BADDIES?

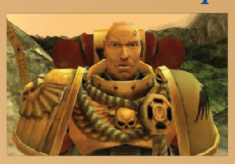
For all the drama, 40K's Imperium of Man is far from the good guys. The fanbase has been plagued in recent

MARINE BIOLOGY

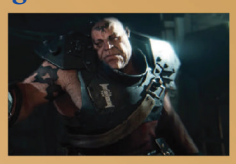
How does Titus compare to other 40K protagonists?



SHAS'LA KAIS
FIRE WARRIOR
Kais is surprisingly tough for one of the usually squishy Tau, but Titus would still snap him like a twig.



GABRIEL ANGELOS
DAWN OF WAR
Titus may be a Primaris these days, but Gabriel's got an entire chapter to back him up – and a bloody great hammer.



OGRYN
DARKTIDE
Darktide's meatiest class is even bigger than a space marine, but he's rather less good at the daily Wordle.

years by neo-Nazi fans who idolise the dystopian faction. Games Workshop has tried to shake off those kinds of fans the last few years. For *Space Marine 2*, how does the team approach delivering on the fantasy of being this all powerful space marine while not glorifying the things they represent? For Oliver, it's about trusting the audience to see that world for what it is. "My personal approach is to present things as they are and allow the viewer to make their own decisions," Oliver explains. "We present the universe very much from a space marine's perspective because that's the story, but the universe is evident. You can't look at a hive city, that's built on top of 50 floors of poverty stricken individuals living short lives, without thinking, my god, what kind of universe is this?" Certainly, there's very little of the world we see in *Space Marine 2* that looks like it'd be pleasant to live in.

So what's the appeal of this grim, relentlessly bleak universe? Why tell stories there? Oliver cites two major reasons. "The universe itself is just so vast, and so the potential for storytelling is almost unlimited. You can choose all of these different factions, you can tell a story at all these various points in this vast history. Games Workshop have always been somewhat vague about the details in the universe. Which is deliberate because it allows players to create entire campaigns that don't conflict with the history." For Oliver the setting is an open playing field for them, where their stories have no limits. Yet there is also a personal draw to this world.

PATRON OF VIRTUE

"Speaking from my own perspective, being a teenager was a difficult experience at the best of times," he tells me. "Being able to step into a world that is shared by lots of other people, going through the same thing, a world in which you can take on the role of these incredibly powerful warriors... and it's great to see that Games Workshop have added many more female hero characters now, opening up options for many more people... to step out of your ordinary life as a teenager or a young adult, into a world where you're empowered to fight alongside, in the case of the space marines, your battle brothers – and I've stood in the Games Workshop stores around these tables rolling dice, experiencing that first hand – it is a great experience. I would look forward to it each week.

"I think the games, wherever possible, have tried to stay true to that experience. To play alongside others. And I think that is what a lot of young people really look for. A lot of people my age as well, because I'm enjoying playing this game and a lot of people who remember those days also have such a good feeling about this universe."

Oliver couldn't confirm or deny whether co-op was a part of *Space Marine 2* but it seems safe to assume that at the very least, Titus won't be alone in facing these impossible odds. Camaraderie will be the bright spot in this world for players. Feeling a part of something larger is key to selling *Space Marine 2*'s scale, as much as any number of foes and vast vistas. It's a busy time for Warhammer games at the moment, and while that may make it harder to stand out, *Space Marine 2*'s roaring, explosive take on the universe certainly won't be lost in the crowd. ■

BELOW: A world so huge it dwarfs even the ten foot tall space marine Titus.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

GOTY gripe

One of the curses of print is that we have to finalise our magazine Game of the Year awards before the year is done – and sometimes before some of the biggest releases of the year. It's only rarely that a game comes out in November or December that makes us regret our choices, but we're kicking ourselves a bit this year following the late release of two games that are definitely entering the hallowed halls of PCPP's favourites: *WH40k: Darktide* and *Marvel's Midnight Suns*.

Two very different games, really, but both encapsulating so much of what we love about PC gaming – scale, strategy, power fantasy, and, to be honest, weirdness. They're both games forging their own path, with wonderfully strong senses of their own identity.

WE'RE KICKING OURSELVES A BIT THIS YEAR FOLLOWING THE LATE RELEASE OF TWO GAMES THAT ARE DEFINITELY ENTERING THE HALLOWED HALLS OF PCPP'S FAVOURITES: WH40K: DARKTIDE AND MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS.

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FREE GAMES
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THEY'RE BACK
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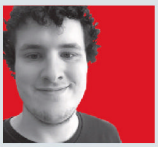
79 **Axiom Verge**
79 Mirror's Edge

This month's grimdark reviewers...

SEAN MARTIN
Specialist in
Mega city living
Currently playing
WH40K: Darktide
This month
Proved himself to the Inquisition, one splattered heretic corpse at a time.

DOMINIC TARASON
Specialist in
Android dreams
Currently playing
Signalis
This month
Signalled to us that we'd almost missed a modern horror gem.



JEREMY PEEL
Specialist in
Platonic power
Currently playing
Marvel's Midnight Suns
This month
Became best friends with all your favourite comic book heroes.

TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Splash damage
Currently playing
Floodland
This month
Learned how to survive in a flooded world. A bit of homework for 2033, eh?

DASHIELL WOOD
Specialist in
Haunting melodies
Currently playing
Ghost Song
This month
Heard the song of the ghosts, and decided he'd rather listen to Taylor Swift.

SHOTS IN THE DARK

Bash heretics to save a wonderfully horrible world in WARHAMMER 40K: DARKTIDE

By Sean Martin

Warhammer 40K eats people. I don't mean that it will consume your life, or that your home will be taken over by the countless models that you don't have time to paint. No, I mean the setting itself is fuelled on corpses – whether it's the soldiers of the Astra Militarum dying in crusades, the Administratum clerks toiling over documents, or the criminals forced into permanent sentence.

It's a truth that *Warhammer 40K: Darktide* understands; whether it's you or the Poxwalker you're about to cleave in half, you're both just meat in some god's army. In a not-so-different life, that medicae servitor, tending to the wounded while encased in machinery, might have had your face instead. Plainly stated, it sucks to be a human – or an ogryn – in 40K. You probably told some sergeant you were tired of eating corpse starch, and now you're here, a prisoner of the Inquisition, sent to liberate Hive Tertium with a shovel and some old lasgun, to burn your life at the altar of a mute god.

It's easy to understand why playing as a Space Marine makes for a far better power fantasy, but just like *Vermintide* before it, *Darktide* is not about the most powerful characters in the setting. That's not to say it doesn't make you feel powerful, but it's a kind of measured power. A handful of Space Marines could probably free Tertium by lunchtime, but alas, it's up to you and your band of misfits to save the hive; or what's left to be saved anyway.

Sent to liberate Hive Terium with a shovel and some old lasgun

SEA CHANGE

First off, it's important to acknowledge how *Darktide* is different from *Vermintide*. The game represents a shift in Fatshark's storytelling – where *Vermintide II* depicted the past exploits of the Ubersreik five, in *Darktide* you are part of a developing narrative. This is Fatshark's first game with a live-service-style story at launch, and it'll change as the situation in Hive Tertium unfolds. Black Library author Dan Abnett, who helped Fatshark create Tertium and Atoma Prime, describes them as "a venue for interesting things". The setting is built to support an ongoing story, so if you're enthused about the possibility of new classes and enemies, there's a high likelihood we'll see them.

As it stands, *Darktide* feels more like a prologue or a first chapter right now, introducing you to the hive and the not-so-friendly faces of Rannick's Inquisitorial band. I love Hive Tertium itself – how claustrophobic corridors open into vast gothic halls, or how each zone has its own sense of identity and backstory, from the waterlogged Torrent, to the fiery forges of the Metalfab, to the shanty towns of the Hourglass. It does make me sad that there aren't any hive-based characters, like a planetary governor or some guild bureaucrat, since Tertium is still inhabited. There are some signs of life in the hive – places where fugitives have obviously slept rough, or hidden from the heretic invaders – but the hive doesn't feel properly lived in at the moment. In a game centred around the human perspective of 40K, I'd like to speak to some regular 40K humans please.

The other thing *Darktide* is sorely lacking is a tangible antagonist or even some inkling about what the heretics are planning for Atoma Prime. But I guess information is about trust, and the game makes it plain that no one trusts you no matter what you do. It really is a rags-to-rags story in typical 40K fashion, but I hope Fatshark finds a way to add more narrative elements to its missions in the future.

TIDE YOU OVER

For those familiar with *Vermintide II*'s skull-splitting melee antics, *Darktide* will feel like chatting with an old friend, until that friend pulls out a lasgun and vaporises your face. As you happily slaughter your way through Tertium's cramped corridors and gloomy halls with an array of 40K weapons, you'll eventually come face to face with a squad of heretic troopers armed with guns. They'll be just beyond your smacking range, and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 40K-based spiritual sequel to Fatshark's co-op action series *Vermintide*

EXPECT TO PAY
$59.95

DEVELOPER
Fatshark Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

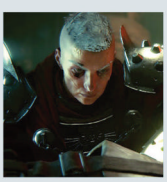
REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, i5-12400F, 16GB DDR4 Ram, RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

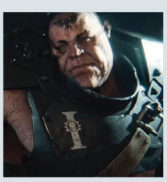
LINK
playdarktide.com

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

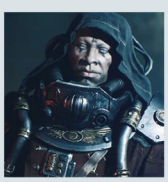
CLASS ACT *The currently available specialisms*



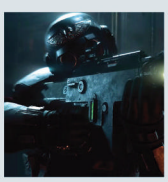
PREACHER
All about wading into melee, the Preacher is a bastion of faith and fury, and is able to quickly regain toughness.



SKULLBREAKER
Skullbreakers are able to revive without interruption, and bring an arsenal of heavy weapons to the table.

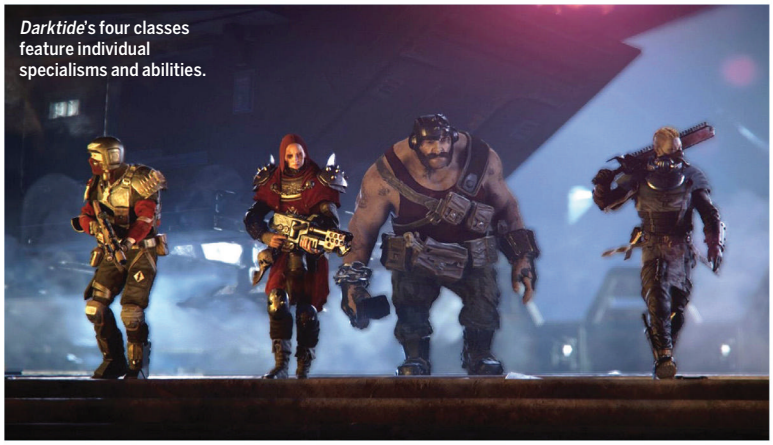


PSYKINETIC
Though they have little health, Psykinetics can use their warp powers to pop the heads of elite enemies.



SHARPSHOOTER
Best placed away from the thickest fight, Sharpshooters are adept at picking off those pesky ranged enemies.

Darktide's four classes feature individual specialisms and abilities.



ABOVE: Your reject is never far beyond suspicion of treachery.

LEFT: Tertium's zones offer some variety in terms of levels.

Darktide's vendors upgrade equipment as well as selling weapons and cosmetics.

RIGHT: Fatshark has done a great job channelling 40K's gloomy vibes.

BELOW: *Darktide* is just as blood-soaked as its predecessor.

as you try to close the distance and get shot up, you'll understand *Darktide*'s challenge.

Dealing with distance and ranged enemies is the game's most significant hurdle, but there are multiple ways to approach it. A Veteran Sharpshooter might pick off ranged units from a distance, or the Ogryn may use their riot shield to tank incoming shots for the squad. My personal favourite is the Zealot, dashing at enemies in-between volleys to bring them into melee.

You can also suppress ranged enemies by firing at them, though in-practice this does feel a little pointless when you can usually just shoot them instead. What is death if not the ultimate form of suppression? Not that ammo is in short supply: there are so many bullets now, maybe even too many. After *Vermintide II*'s stingy ammo economy, I don't feel right leaving ammo behind, but sometimes my gun is just plain full. It is nice to be able to use a ranged weapon for something other than picking off special enemies, though.

I expected the full introduction of hybrid combat to feel broken at first, but Fatshark has done an amazing job. The core is there in terms of how good its chaotic combat and weapons feel – revving my chainsword to bisect an enemy champion is exactly the kind of 40K experience I was craving. The ranged weapons are great, too: planting a lasbolt in the head of a sniper or clocking them on the head with an Ogryn grenade is extremely satisfying.

With so many more variables in terms of ranged threats, special enemies, and the tools you have to deal with them, *Darktide* is the most comprehensive iteration of Fatshark's formula yet: fast and fluid as you move point-to-point, threat-to-threat. Classes also feel like they have defined strengths, and the introduction of the buffs and shield regen that you get in close proximity to your squad are a welcome incentive for team-based play in matchmade missions.

While the combat is certainly better, the lack of a full crafting system on release is a step back from *Vermintide*, and wasn't the best way to showcase *Darktide*'s amazing arsenal. However, the UI has been significantly tweaked since the pre-order beta, making it a lot easier to understand how weapons actually work and what they're good for.

CRIMINAL CAHOOTS

Another significant departure is that *Darktide* lets you piece together your own character, crafting a backstory of betrayal and heartbreak, and fashioning their fearsome countenance from a wonderful selection of tattoos, scars, and grizzled faces. You get to pick their personality and voice, which is what stands as a substitute for *Vermintide*'s much-loved banter. The Psyker who believes that everything happening is just a terrible dream is wildly relatable, but I personally picked the posh Zealot who's such an off-hand bastard you can't help but laugh.

Things are still not ideal in terms of crashes and stability

In-between firefights and skirmishes I'll catch some screamed voiceline that causes me to crack up, but on the whole I don't feel much of a connection to *Darktide*'s rejects. Where Fatshark's previous games had characters with distinctive backstories, the quality of *Darktide*'s banter feels reliant on the random party combo you end up with. Four Zealots for example, just seem to basically agree that xenophobia is good the whole time, whereas contention and rivalry are often at the heart of quality banter. The introduction of premium cosmetics helps a little in terms of personality, but I'm not a fan of the current implementation.

What rankles me is that the no-spend cosmetics all appear to be reskins of those you get in the main game through challenges, while there's no way to work towards earning the fancier, premium ones. Most live-service games have some kind of no-spend currency, letting players earn the odd premium item, and I think *Darktide* needs that, especially as a game that isn't free-to-play. I understand that the premium cosmetics help fund *Darktide*'s further development, but them appearing before we have a full crafting system, or proper social features, isn't the best.

Things are still not ideal in terms of crashes and stability. It's hard to understate how much of a wholly negative experience this has been for some players. My modest setup managed the game fine, but a variety high-end rigs have struggled with performance and crashes. *Darktide* also suffers from its lack of an endgame, mostly due to the fact that the crafting system hasn't been fully implemented, which limits your potential, and so too your ability to get into the highest difficulty content.

But despite all of that, I think *Darktide*'s combat is better than *Vermintide II*, and strong enough that it holds the game together. I also think Fatshark has nailed the feel of Warhammer 40K. The very fact that I get to play as some tattooed hive ganger or a loveable ogryn instead of a Space Marine brings me so much joy, especially since the human perspective of 40K is so rarely aired beyond Black Library novels. Does it need a lot more work? Yes, but *Darktide* is a solid foundation. Just like *Vermintide II* before it, I think it will blossom into a truly excellent game, given time. ■

WEAPONS OF WAR

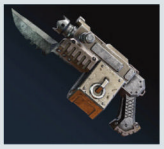
My favourite equipment so far

FLAMER
There are few easier ways to decimate an enemy horde than unleashing a gout of fire into them.

CHAINSWORD
Capable of fast and deadly strikes, but you can also rev it up to kill tougher enemies.

LASGUN
Available in a variety of firing patterns, these laser rifles are the staples of the Astra Militarum.

RIOT SHIELD
Lets the Ogryn block bullets as well as melee attacks, helping him defend the squad.



RIPPER GUN
This automatic slug weapon blows away just about any enemy that pops their head up.

FORCE STAFF
Grants psychic powers, from unleashing white fire to summoning AoE explosions.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Though *Darktide* needs more time to develop, its core gameplay is the best iteration of Fatshark's formula yet.

80

RADIOTHERAPY

SIGNALIS is one of the best psychological sci-fi chillers in years

By Dominic Tarason

Horror is hard to do right, especially when not relying on jump scares. It's why the original *Silent Hill* games are regarded as classics, while their many sequels and imitators are largely forgotten. Despite being the debut release from tiny two-person studio Rose-Engine, sci-fi horror adventure *Signalis* joins that coveted pantheon as one of the best in the genre, and a personal favourite from a jam-packed year.

Signalis will feel familiar to anyone who played PS1 survival horror games. Viewed from an overhead perspective, there's a labyrinth of interconnected rooms to explore, many locked doors, logical and more abstract puzzles, and an assortment of monsters to shoot. Inventory space is at a premium, healing is finite, and the game can only be saved at safe-rooms.

Aesthetically, it refines that PS1 style. Backdrops are crisp pixel-art while characters are smoothly animated 3D. The retro-tech UI is similarly sharp, featuring an especially good map screen, automatically marking doors as locked, barred or open. Audio-wise, it channels Akira Yamaoka, with industrial drones accompanying quieter moments, chaotic, panicked noise kicking in during combat, and an assortment of nostalgic tones accompanying menu actions.

Combat is tense and resource-limited, encouraging evasion and ammo-hoarding. Puzzles stall progress just long enough to deliver a eureka moment. The only truly unfamiliar mechanical element is the radio tuner, allowing you to decode radio signals. Sometimes creepy numbers stations, often puzzle hints, and occasionally frequencies used in combat.

Puzzles stall progress just long enough to deliver a eureka moment

Resident Evil 1's remake is borrowed from directly, including 'panic items' for escaping close combat, and a limited supply of incendiaries to burn corpses. While similar to *Resident Evil* mechanically, *Signalis*' atmosphere hews closer to *Silent Hill*, telling the story of a lone technician android named Elster descending into metaphorical hell in search of her missing co-pilot.

While *Signalis* trades in familiar sci-fi horror tropes, this is psychological horror. It's a character-driven, emotional story, intentionally fragmented and dreamlike. A downward spiral following a potentially unreliable narrator.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Psychological sci-fi survival horror inspired by *Silent Hill*

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.95 (Also on Game Pass)

DEVELOPER
Rose Engine

PUBLISHER
Humble Games

REVIEWED ON
Windows 11, Core i9-9900k, 32GB RAM, GeForce 2080 Ti

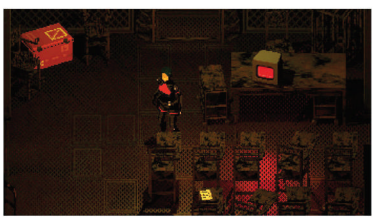
MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
rose-engine.org/signalis

MACHINE WOMEN

Signalis' narrative is carried by smart worldbuilding. There are dozens of diaries, logs and documents painting a broad, tragic picture of an alternate, dark timeline where strange new sciences allowed the early creation of sentient androids (known as Replikas), interstellar expansion and a war between a largely-unseen Empire and the fascistic Eusan nation.

It's under the Eusan banner that the cast struggle, and their stories are hauntingly human. They're ordinary people trying to live normal lives while the gears of their cruel society threaten to grind them into dust. It would be horrifying enough without



ABOVE: Some areas will have you missing the oppressive sci-fi corridors.

Ordinary office supplies, if sci-fi horror has taught me anything.

Elster isn't the only person having a terrible day.

ABOVE: Shades of *Silent Hill*. Familiar tone, but a new story.

FAR RIGHT: Stay frosty, lock on and save yourself some ammunition.

dark secrets lurking deep in distant planets and pseudo-undead androids stalking the halls. With them, it's a rich, layered dessert of despair, lending motivation to even the most desperate character's actions.

Signalis is also rich in playful references. From nods to classic horror like The King in Yellow, to sequences riffing off heavyweight anime like Ghost in the Shell and Evangelion. Famous paintings and haunting classical music ground the setting in the familiar, despite being used in unsettlingly dreamlike ways.

Even after completing it twice, the only real complaint I can level at *Signalis* is that inventory management is a little too fiddly. Elster can only carry six items. Leaving healing items behind and only carrying one gun can help, but backtracking to item boxes is nigh-inescapable.

Despite this one wrinkle, *Signalis* is one of the best horror games I've played in years. Tense, upsetting and thought-provoking. It takes a hundred familiar elements, inspirations and references and weaves them into something entirely new and thoroughly worthwhile. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Tense, haunting and beautiful. Inventory shenanigans aside, one of the best survival horror games yet.

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DEATH-AVOIDANCE AND YOU

Mostly-universal tips for classic survival horror

1 TRAVEL LIGHT Inventory space is at a premium in *Signalis* and you WILL run out of it at the worst possible moment.

2 CONSERVE AMMO You'll never have enough ammo to fight everything. If a room lets you dodge around foes, do so.

3 DON'T HOARD You might not have enough ammunition for every enemy, but you've got enough to fight when you need to.

4 TAKE NOTES *Signalis* has a lot of puzzles, and many require you to remember clues that you saw in rooms you've been through.

IRON MAN MODE

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS successfully morphs XCOM into social simulation, somehow

By Jeremy Peel

The team behind *XCOM* has given me my next mission objective. It's not to destroy an alien relay, extract a VIP from a hot zone, or board a crashed UFO. Instead, I'm to watch a movie with a friend in *Marvel's Midnight Suns*. It's a western, if the Eastwood-esque figure flashing across the television set is anything to go by, though the particulars of the film's plot turn out to be entirely unimportant.

Movie night is merely a pretext to have a deep conversation with a new teammate, named Nico. We bond over our evil moms: hers a philanthropist sorceress who murdered children, mine a demonic goddess who banished me to a cold grave in the late 17th century. Nico, whose superpower appears to be cheeriness in the face of trauma, resolves to catch me up on the entire history of motion pictures: "The first thing you need to know – the glowing briefcase is a metaphor."

So goes my first night in the Abbey, the picturesque fortress around which all the action of *Midnight Suns* revolves. I've long since settled in, hanging classic paintings from the austere walls of my chamber, setting up a plush bed for Charlie the hellhound, and picking the spooky estate grounds clean of reagents to throw into the library's cauldron. Yet tens of hours later, I've never stopped unpacking baggage with my various magical, irradiated, or vampiric roomies. It's a surprise I still haven't gotten over, or stopped appreciating: Firaxis' big-budget contribution to the Marvel universe is just as dedicated a downtime simulator as it is a turn-based tactics game. And despite the studio's expertise historically skewing toward the latter, *Midnight Suns* is equally accomplished in both fields.

It's all about fusing ever tighter with your teammates

In retrospect, you can trace a line from the last project Jake Solomon directed, *XCOM 2: War of the Chosen*, to this one. Back then, Firaxis emphasised the bonds between your soldiers with shared moves, and introduced a trio of taunting supervillains – who, in their reptilian loftiness, bear more than a passing resemblance to *Midnight Suns*' big bad, Lilith. The developer's new effort represents a doubling down, or perhaps even a quadrupling, of those elements. It's all about fusing ever tighter with your teammates in an attempt to combat nemeses who, despite repeated pummellings in rooftop arena battles, refuse to stay down. The minions of Hydra are but set dressing in these ongoing relationship dramas – convenient nearby objects to pick up and smash Sabretooth or Crossbones across the chops with.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A friendship simulator masquerading as a turn-based XCOM-alike

EXPECT TO PAY
$89.95

DEVELOPER
Firaxis Games

PUBLISHER
2K

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, AMD Ryzen 5 5600X, 16GB RAM, RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

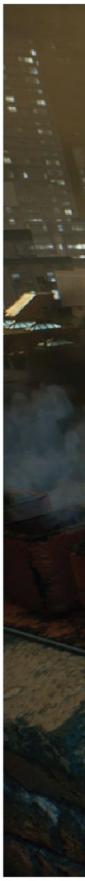
LINK
midnightsuns.2k.com

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

EX-COM

When I interviewed Solomon at the end of last year, he described the combat in *Midnight Suns* as the opposite of *XCOM*. The studio has rejected its previous reliance on probability as a tool for tension and emergent storytelling. There's only one instance when a percentage figure appears on-screen – as you attempt to knock an enemy into a New York sinkhole or abyssal vortex for an instakill (extra points to Firaxis' animators for the way they teeter on the edge, hands flailing but not giving away the outcome). At every other time, *Midnight Suns* deals in the deterministic math of *Into the Breach* – doing away with mystery to show which of your heroes will be crushed beneath Venom's hurled debris next turn, and precisely how much damage they'll take.

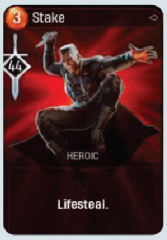
The up-front numbers make it possible, and in fact desirable, to calculate the results of your entire turn before you begin it. If your team of three heroes can KO every enemy on the board before you run out of plays, then that's match end – an early victory that comes with a bonus in Gloss, the currency used to buy



GET DECKED

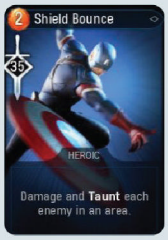
The most satisfying cards to play

SWARM
Nico's magic is best represented by this low-cost, but potentially high damage, draw.



STAKE
Blade is a vampire hunter, but don't forget he's a vampire too – and that means powerful lifesteal.

HELL RIDE
It's tricky to force enemies to line up, but the JRPG-style visual payoff is worth the effort.



SHIELD BOUNCE
Captain America's iconic ranged attack is less crowd control, more thumping the throng.

No special edition Toblerone could outmatch Doctor Strange.

LEFT: Some iconic locations get messed up in this adventure.

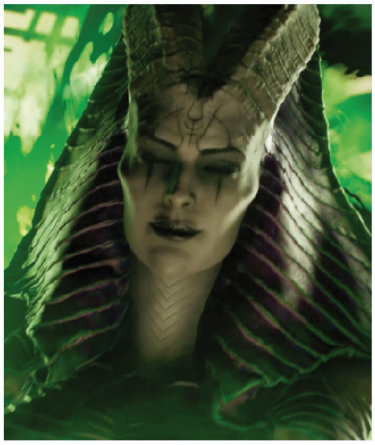
BELOW: Unusual character mashups are frequent in *Midnight Suns*.

Venom is one of many villains under Lilith's thrall.

RIGHT: Lilith is both the villain and your own mother. Awkward.

FAR RIGHT: Ghost Rider's car is a fixture of the Abbey's garage.

BELOW: Some cards generate Heroic points, which can fuel environmental kills.



your comrades gifts and renovate the Abbey. If not, you can expect more goons to flood the screen on your next turn, and the one after that.

Yet you rarely feel like you're drowning. Since this is a Marvel fantasy, every hero in your roster can one-shot a minion without breaking a sweat – and every fresh Hydra body is an opportunity to flex by flinging an opponent into an explosive barrel with Ghost Rider's flaming chain, or knocking them upside their head with a stack of New York newspapers. All the while, you'll take any opportunity to tip a lamppost onto a more significant henchman, chipping away at their health bar until you can deliver that final, match-ending knockout. This potential for weaponising the environment during extended, bloodless beatings in a cramped arena lends *Midnight Suns* the feel of hardcore WWE. Firaxis has evidently put in the hours to convey the impact of each collision – delivering the audio-visual FX equivalent of a bright-red, capitalised THWACK.

CARD-INAL SIN

Despite the welcome clarity, immediacy and satisfaction of this setup, combat in *Midnight Suns* still isn't quite as intuitive as it could be. That largely comes down to the confusing relationship between the arena, a tangible space where all the fighting happens, and your action cards – drawn from a pre-selected deck that contains every ability your three heroes are capable of. Whenever you play an attack card, like Spidey's Web Throw, your character will move to the best vantage point on the map to deliver their particular brand of smackdown. If you're not careful, that new spot might also bring you within range of, say, an explosion due to go off next turn. Nasty consequences are always visible when selecting a card, but it takes a while to grasp the importance of positioning your characters in a game that otherwise encourages you to think in more abstract terms.

Nevertheless, the fighting never gets old. That's partly thanks to a variety of combat objectives and sub-bosses, but mainly due to the fact that – and this cannot be emphasised enough – you're likely to spend much less than half the game battling. For every encounter atop the Avengers tower, there's an evening spent decompressing and picking over the fallout of the latest plot revelation.

You're likely to spend much less than half the game battling

The Abbey functions much like *Mass Effect*'s Normandy, if it was plonked down in the gardens of a stately home. You can often find characters in areas related to their speciality: Blade out in the Yard, supervising weapons training; Tony Stark and Doctor Strange in the Forge, working to splice magic and metallurgy; Peter Parker and Ghost Rider hiding in the Shop, a cave/garage, so that they can tinker without anyone looking over their shoulders and telling them how it should be done. But every character in your roster is present on your map, dotted around the Abbey – ready to be tracked down for a Bioware-style conversation, or invited to go mushroom-picking in the grounds.

As Carol Danvers says, "All work and no play is how we ended up with Ultron". But there's strategy to your social life, too. Not to get too Patrick Bateman about it, but each chat is an opportunity to steer the stats in your favour. Study your peers and you can figure out what activities might suit them, and which responses will rub them the right way. Parker likes reassurance and to keep his hands busy; Stark appreciates luxury gifts and a bit of pushback against his goading. Gather enough love, and you'll unlock team combos, the most powerful attacks available. Or you can forgo the schmoozing and focus on stacking up 'light' or 'dark'-aligned conversation options, building up combat rewards that way.

Where *Midnight Suns* most resembles *XCOM* is in the level of interplay between its battle and base layers. Train with Ghost Rider in the Yard, and he'll draw extra cards during the next fight; take him on a mission when he's feeling left out, and your friendship may level up. Odd doodads are brought back from the field, which lead to new cards and research breakthroughs that allow you to keep up with an enemy growing in power. You're never in fear of falling fatally behind the power curve, however, as the challenge is automatically adjusted to match the level of your heroes on the field. By subtracting the thrilling terror of *XCOM*, Firaxis has found warmth and approachability.

STRANGE DAYS

Which is fitting for a game fundamentally about friendship. The extended Marvel cast has rarely been better served than it is by the Abbey's after-school clubs and enforced fun. Rather than quipping emptily to each other across a burning skyscraper, these characters are relating and comparing notes. They find solace in each others' company during a difficult time, or grumble about Tony installing a state-of-the-art coffee machine in a haunted hideout.

The Abbey's scenes are frequently searching, and endearingly silly. In which other game can you say you've been stargazing with Stephen Strange? I learned more about the man's values and regrets during those two minutes than over ten multiversal adventures. In the quiet, the mess of contradictions that is every Marvel character's personal history is allowed to sit – to be investigated for commonalities, or sent up for comic effect.

Like Nico, *Midnight Suns* wants to storm into your room and pull you by the arm into the party. Whether that's what every strategy head wants is to be determined. But if you can meet Firaxis on its own terms, you'll be dazzled. ■

DEEP CUTS

Meet the lesser-known Suns in orbit

MAGIK
Moody Siberian immigrant and Colossus' sister. Teleports her teammates through Limbo, where she was once imprisoned.

SISTER GRIMM
A witch with a magic staff that responds to her voice – but each word can only be used once. Played by Lyrica Okano, reprising her role from Runaways.

THE HUNTER
A mentee of Agatha Harkness, this 300 year old was invented by Firaxis. Prefers to go by Hunter, because that sounds more like an actual name.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Who knew the inheritors of Sid Meier's turn-based legacy had a secret, and completely brilliant, *Persona* game in them?

88

ALL GORE

Walk down gaming's moodiest corridors in THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

By Shaun Prescott

Working man pilot Jacob Lee has crash landed on the dead moon of Callisto, after his cargo ship is boarded by a notorious terrorist group. First, he discovers his colleague has died a gruesome death during the crash. Next, Lee is arrested, and he has a long life spent in the moon's Black Iron prison to look forward to. But then the prison falls afoul of some mysterious disaster that turns its inhabitants into crazed mutants.

The stakes are clear: Lee is in deep shit and must dig himself out of it. *The Callisto Protocol* wastes no time cementing the terror of its setting. Now we just need to walk through corridors for 15 hours and butcher our way through it.

Boy, are there corridors. The opening hours have everything: claustrophobic engine rooms littered with burst gushing valves, echoing vents, subterranean crawl spaces full of pustulant slimy growth. The middle and late hours have a lot of all that stuff too, though some areas do sprawl a touch, and by the game's end there are some deviations from the grimdark corridor format.

The feel of playing *Callisto Protocol* is very much the feel of playing *Dead Space*. There's the same pristine, diegetic user interface, the same lumbering, over-the-shoulder control, and the same freedom to foot stomp corpses into pools of bloody masticated pudding. It adopts *Dead Space*'s honed balance of 'powerful, yet vulnerable', but takes a newly rhythmic approach to hand-to-hand combat. Over the course of 15 hours I never felt like I could nail the timing of the ostensibly simple evasion system. In the heat of the moment – and especially when coping with more than one enemy – I often just resorted to panic-shooting.

I never found myself wanting for resources on medium difficulty

GRAVITY CRUSH

Lee has a glowing green bar on the back of his head that indicates his health, and another blue one that indicates whether his GRP has overheated. The GRP is *The Callisto Protocol*'s answer to *Control*'s levitate, or *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun, and it's great fun. In a game full of spongey baddies, this weapon lets you pick most of them up and toss them off platforms and into chasms, or more regularly, into wall-mounted spikes.

The GRP energy is finite, but like the ammo reserves for *Callisto*'s five ranged weapons, I never found myself wanting for resources on medium difficulty. I actually turned to selling ammunition and health, in order to level up my abilities at the regular 3D printer workstations faster. I focused on the GRP as soon as I realised how useful it was, though I eventually felt like I should have invested more into the regular weapons, too, because the GRP is basically useless during some of the more torturous late game fights.

I didn't find any of the baddies especially scary, if only because I've played a lot of horror games with enemies just like these, but there are a few loathsome predators that were the exception. It's not the appearance of these more fearsome mutants

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Third-person survival horror made by *Dead Space* veterans

EXPECT TO PAY
$89.95

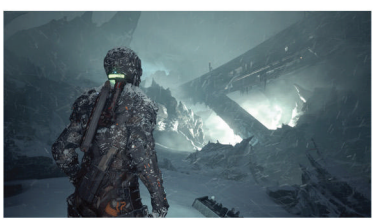
DEVELOPER
Striking Distance

PUBLISHER
Krafton

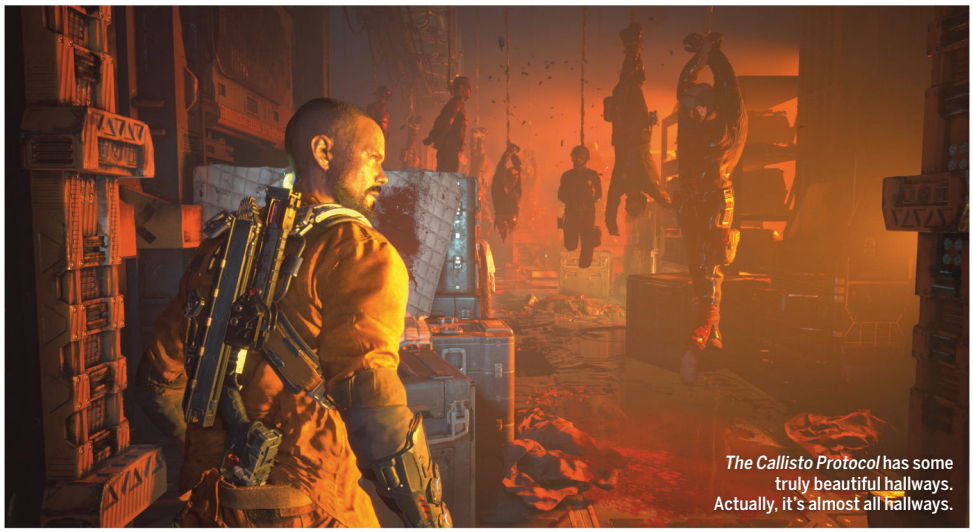
REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, AMD Ryzen 5 5600X Six Core CPU, 16GB RAM, Nvidia Geforce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

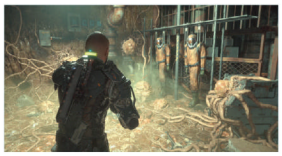
LINK
callisto.sds.com



ABOVE: It's not all corridors. Occasionally, *The Callisto Protocol* surprises with its environments, but there's still usually only one path.



The Callisto Protocol has some truly beautiful hallways. Actually, it's almost all hallways.



TOP: Maybe there's a more tactful way to palm off an advance, Jacob?

ABOVE: In horror games, the appearance of pustulant, slimy, tentacle-y things usually bodes ill.

that's threatening, but how they move around the environments. There's also the ever-lingering threat that if you don't shoot the emerging tentacles off a mutant they'll morph into something more formidable.

Checkpoints are generous enough that, outside of a few prickly areas, I rarely found myself repeating encounters until very late in the game. I died a lot in the second half, but at least there was the disgusting novelty of a new death scene. I don't find *Callisto*'s excessive approach to gore very interesting or shocking, but thankfully it doesn't lean on blood and guts at the expense of setting an utterly grim atmosphere.

The Callisto Protocol is riddled with cinematic videogame cliches. Yes, you'll navigate a crumbling structure that will start to collapse as you cross it. Yes, you'll need to power on a generator by finding breakers that are located in different locations. *The Callisto Protocol* feels like a new, albeit well-qualified studio, singing to the crowd, "We can make these kinds of games that you really, really want." And we, the crowd – most of us anyway – will sing back, "Yes, you can, keep on going." ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Gory and grim in equal measure, *The Callisto Protocol* doesn't mess with the survival horror formula.

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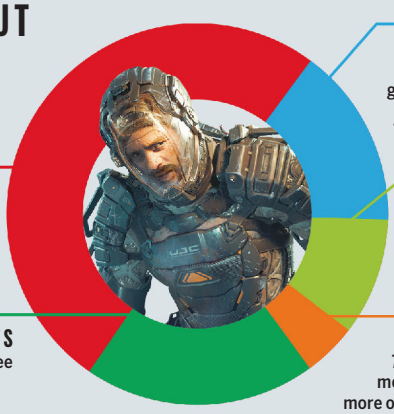
This is tastefully restrained compared to the amount of blood you'll see throughout *The Callisto Protocol*.

SPACED OUT

How I spent my time



50% WALKING THROUGH CORRIDORS
Creepy hallways aplenty!

20% BASHING MUTANTS
Combat is mixed: melee is a bit annoying, but using the GRP and weapons is a joy.

15% WATCHING GORE
The death animations grow more excessive as the game progresses. They're a bit overdone.

10% SQUEEZING THROUGH PASSAGES
Got to hide those loading screens.

5% FEELING SCARED
The Callisto Protocol is moody, and grim, but it's more of a blockbuster joyride than a survival horror.

DANCES WITH WEREWOLVES

EVIL WEST pits cowboys against vampires in a beefy brawler

By Jon Bailes

Jesse Rentier is your usual no-nonsense action man; a stubbled slab of beef who sees every situation in black and white. He's the type to remind you constantly that he's not cut out for pencil-pushing desk work, as if you couldn't tell by looking at him that he'd struggle to even hold a pencil without snapping it in two. In other words, he's neither refined nor imaginative, but he is solid, focused and capable of magnificent violence. A description that can be equally applied to *Evil West*.

In an alternate late 19th century USA, Jesse is the top field agent at the Rentier Institute, an organisation established to combat a scourge of vampires that's been nibbling on cowboys since the founding fathers. Given the sun-fearing nature of his foes, shootouts at high noon are off the table here, so Jesse heads out on expeditions to track down the bloodsuckers, along with their pet werewolves and other abominations they've manufactured. There's more to the story than that, of course, but walloping the undead is your chief concern. Besides, the plot and dialogue hardly demand attention – the aim is to evoke the vibe of macho '80s action movies, but it's a clumsy tribute act.

Cutscenes are mercifully infrequent, at least, as *Evil West* adopts a 'get on with it' approach throughout. The main path connecting the combat arenas is marked with a glowing silver chain to keep you oriented as you indulge in some light exploration. Sometimes you have to find and pull a lever before advancing, or push a minecart, or dislodge some scenery with your rifle, but very little that would qualify as a puzzle. In some ways the lack of bloat is a blessing, but it also feels rather short on aspiration.

ASSAULT AND BATTERY

Fortunately, *Evil West* comes to life on the battlefield. Its monsters are monstrous and Jesse has a wealth of tricks up his sleeve, or at least a metal gauntlet that adds extra heft to his punches, along with a selection of firearms. Indeed, the game does a sterling job swinging between shootouts and brawls, often within the same encounter. It then mixes in a wealth of new toys, such as an electric charge for the gauntlet that allows you to electrocute an enemy with a magnetic pull that drags it towards you or vice versa, then a shotgun, the first of a string of arms and devices that works on a timer and helps with crowd control.

Sometimes it's surprising just how much *Evil West* throws at you

The options can seem overwhelming, in fact, but they become second nature because you have to deploy everything to survive. Vampires and their buddies rush and pelt you from all sides, so you have to keep moving, stun them with electric currents and maintain an itchy trigger finger. Then, as more powerful creatures materialise, escalating the scale of the fight, you indulge in a battle of one-upmanship, whipping out bigger guns until one side runs out of juice. You can't help but smile when you're almost out of health at the tail end of a rumble, but know you've held your last-resort supercharged finisher in reserve to incinerate that final vamp.

Sometimes it's surprising just how much *Evil West* throws at you, and because of the numbers there are frustrations. In some moments you find yourself blindsided by an unreasonable convergence of assaults, or you can't get a clear shot at a sniper because there's too much traffic in the way. Also, while performance is far from shoddy, explosions and particle effects can sabotage the frame rate, while rare glitches might leave Jesse irretrievably stuck in the floor, or a monster left floating in the air.

Still, for much of the game, *Evil West*'s combat remains a robust, gory delight. It's only in the final third that it begins to fade, as the vampires run out of new creatures to throw at you, and instead rehash combinations of familiar ugly faces ad nauseam. As the final showdown approaches, then, you may wish you could 'get on with it' even faster. But at least by then Jesse has learned a thing or two. Perhaps if there's a sequel, he'll combine his proficiency in vampire hunting with a desire for a richer, more sophisticated world. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A character action game set in a vampire-ridden Wild West

EXPECT TO PAY
$69.95

DEVELOPER
Flying Wild Hog

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
focus-entmt.com/en/games/evil-west

FAVOURITE THINGS

Finding the right tool for the job

RIFLE
Your default weapon for long range shooting and hitting enemy weak spots.

CROSSBOW
A shorter range alternative to the rifle, but with a faster firing rate.

GATLING GUN
Weighs you down but there's not much that can touch it for crowd control.

BOOMSTICK
AKA a shotgun. Use it to interrupt close quarters attacks and break shields.

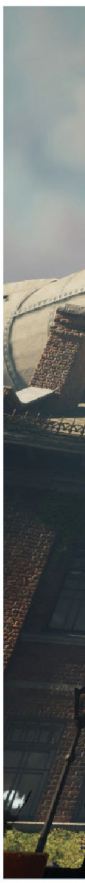
FLAMETHROWER
Perfect for stopping a group in its tracks, and melting their health bars.

EXPLOSIVE BUNDLES
A grenade. Upgrade to make it sticky or throw three at once.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Yee-ha! *Evil West* certainly delivers on its big dumb action game premise, for better and worse.

68



Edgar is a retired hunter who accompanies you on some missions.

FAR LEFT: Stun an enemy and get up close for a finisher.

LEFT: In daylight missions, you at least won't meet any vampires.

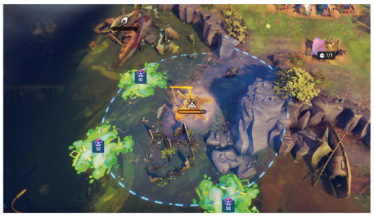
The tech in this alternate USA can be pretty impressive.

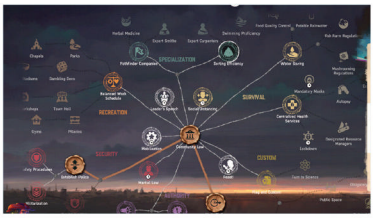
Each clan has different ideas about how to rebuild society.

RIGHT: Build and staff Sorting Huts to collect the islands' rubbish.

FAR RIGHT: In a pinch, you can use unfiltered water and uncooked food.

BELOW: The art style can make things look muddy and indistinct.





SINK OR SWIM

Beginning at the end in soggy citybuilder FLOODLAND

By Tom Sykes

F*loodland*, in a lot of ways, is an epilogue to the traditional citybuilder. Civilisation is in ruins as a result of climate change, and now you have to rebuild with the flotsam and jetsam we left behind. There's no lush, untouched meadow to stick a motorway on, as in *Cities Skylines*. There *are* a lot of smashed-up cars and collapsing houses, rotting boats and wonky skyscrapers, and you'll plunder all of these to rebuild society, for good or ill.

Even before you've set down your first structure, you'll need to scout the area, sending settlers into the fog of war in search of resources. The most urgent is rubbish, which you'll cobble together into homes, along with job stations so you can put your citizens to work.

It might be a world of scattered islands in a flooded apocalypse, but at the start you're almost overwhelmed with resources. Build Sorting Huts to collect the rubbish, Fishing Docks and Field Kitchens to get food, and Water Purifiers to bring in clean drinking water. There's no radiation to worry about in a game has a refreshingly hopeful tone – we'll be alright, after the world ends, if we work together.

Every band of stragglers added to your settlement is a blessed relief. Phew, that's ten more pairs of hands to work in the Insect Hut, and the Baker Station, and the Study to generate research points – but each insists on having a home, food and water. Alas, those bountiful resources don't last forever. While some things do respawn, at some point you'll need to expand to another island.

Expeditions devour time and resources, but you're rewarded with unpicked item heaps and occasionally new clans of survivors. These differ from the regular stragglers in that they have strong, political identities.

Floodland's message might be one of unity, but that doesn't mean it's easy to implement. You start the game with one clan, but as more are integrated, tension rises. Each is represented by a talking head, who will pop up to let you know how badly the clans are getting along.

Anna Brown of the Oakhill Survivors is in favour of public pillories, while the Good Neighbours' Lillie Kapoor finds the idea horrifying. As you pick one over the other – by passing the law allowing pillories to be built – the objecting clan's Unrest meter will grow. High Unrest leads to crime, though if the squabbling gets too serious you can always move that clan to a new district, on an island.

You begin with no clue how to stick two planks of wood together

Despite its overall tone of hope, *Floodland* doesn't pull any punches when it comes to its survival mechanics, demanding constant micromanagement. Rebuilding society is hard work, but ultimately it felt gruelling as I was juggling fish supplies and wood shortages and multiple bickering clans, while having to deal with the glacial pace of technology acquisition.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A survival citybuilder set after the climate change apocalypse

EXPECT TO PAY
$44.95

DEVELOPER
Vile Monarch

PUBLISHER
Ravenscourt

REVIEWED ON
Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ravenscourt.games/en-US/games/floodland

LAGGING BEHIND

You begin with basically no clue how to stick two planks of wood together, and it's a long crawl across several tech trees to establish your city. Research points accrue at a measly rate, unless you top them up with one of two currencies earned only through exploration. Though as I said, Expeditions are drawn-out affairs. As in any citybuilder, while you wait for things to happen your finger will hover over the fast-forward button. Unfortunately, you might want to pull it back.

As my settlement grew larger, performance began to take a hit. I got used to occasional choppiness, but the framerate would *plummet* when I activated fast-forward mode. In the end, I could only use it in short bursts, and not really do anything else till I switched it off.

But even when it behaves itself, I find it difficult to connect with *Floodland*. For a game that values people so highly, all you really see of them are the static portraits of a few clan leaders, and I don't like any of the politicians here very much.

Floodland is an exhaustive (and exhausting) game of survival, expansion and politics, and it can be satisfying keeping on top of the logistical problems. Sadly, with its unlikeable talking heads, it just didn't give me enough of a reason to care. ■

EXPAND ALONE

How and why to expand to the other islands

1 CITY LIMITS
Expansion is no mean feat, requiring piers to be researched, and built on both islands, and settlers to colonise it, taking lots of supplies with them.

2 SPREAD THIN
The benefits include access to piles of resources, but if you want to share them with the main island, people will have to ferry them back and forth.

3 EX-TENSION
The other benefit is keeping feuding clans apart. You'll forgo integration bonuses, but at least they won't come to blows being on separate islands.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Performance and pacing problems mar an otherwise novel and comprehensive survival citybuilder.

76

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Souls-like Metroidvania meets monotony in GHOST SONG

By Dashiell Wood

Repetition is the bread and butter of any Metroidvania but, as I trudge my way through an endless maze of *Ghost Song*'s corridors in search of the next story beat, it's hard not to wonder where things went wrong. First impressions are deceptively strong, thanks to an alluring hand-drawn art style, though as you begin to get to grips with its clunky combat and confusing level design the limitations of its mechanics come to the fore.

You play as the Deadsuit, a robotic entity who wakes from an ancient slumber on the planet of Lorian. It's difficult not to find yourself becoming enthralled by the eerie and oppressive atmosphere that shapes the planet's surface. Everything is bathed in a sinister, supernatural glow, and the beautiful background art is littered with the remains of countless crashed spacecraft in a manner that evokes a pressing sense of isolation and decay.

It's only as you begin to encounter Lorian's army of mutated inhabitants that the first of many major oversights becomes apparent. An awkward keyboard control scheme makes the Deadsuit a far more cumbersome hero than most protagonists, and a baffling lack of mouse support means that your aiming is significantly hampered. While this can be remedied through the use of a compatible controller, this limitation would otherwise render several of the later sections dominated by fast-flying enemies almost impossible.

Even with a controller in hand, traversal feels sluggish thanks to a slow walking speed and a floaty jump. As you would expect from the genre, further movement options are unlocked as you progress, including a double jump and the ability to sprint, but it's hard to ignore the unpleasant degree of imprecision that pervades most attempts at platforming throughout your journey. The combat suffers from a similar degree of sloppiness, where bizarre hitboxes had me dying as the result of enemies hitting through solid surfaces on dozens of occasions.

Even with a controller in hand, traversal feels sluggish

That's not even mentioning the dodge which, as perhaps one of the least effective evasive manoeuvres ever implemented, is incredibly hard to judge by eye and often sends you clipping towards enemies for a near-instantaneous death. The visible meter measuring the move's brief period of invincibility is a positive addition, providing an intuitive alternative to more opaque invincibility frames characteristic of other *Souls*-likes, but there were plenty of occasions where it simply failed to correlate with the damage I was receiving.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sci-fi Metroidvania with a smattering of *Souls*-like mechanics

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.95

DEVELOPER
Old Moon

PUBLISHER
Humble Games

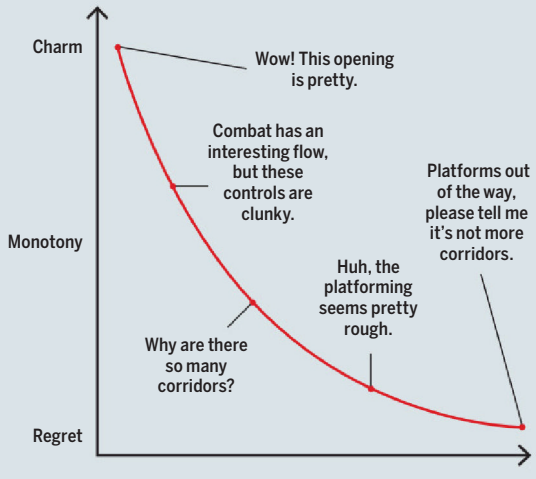
REVIEWED ON
Nvidia RTX 3060, i5-11400F, 16GB Ram

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
humblegames.com/games/ghostsong

OUT OF TUNE

***The slump in your first hours of* Ghost Song**



SOUL SURVIVOR

There's still a glimmer of hope in *Ghost Song*'s foundations, however, and one mechanic which sees your projectile weapon overheat with prolonged use while buffing melee damage led to a pleasant rhythm of chipping away at a weaker enemy's health before landing a satisfying killing punch. The upgrade system is similarly enjoyable, presenting a varied selection of new suit and blaster enhancements, or 'modules', to discover – I particularly enjoyed launching barrages of friendly slimes. Every slain foe also rewards a burst of nanocells, a currency which can then be spent on additional stat upgrades at statues.

On the standard difficulty, death not only drops your current collection of nanocells but also begins to deplete your overall health pool. This can only be restored by spending nanocells at statues, creating something of a catch-22. The only time you would feasibly need to repair the Deadsuit is right after you have died, a time when your newly diminished health bar makes it considerably more difficult to get that cell balance back up. The amount required for repair is thankfully very low, but the fact that statues are so few and far between means they often require a huge detour to reach.

The vast majority of the story is spent backtracking through familiar territory and, although a few interesting sights stand out from the crowd, the sight of the many near-identical dimly lit corridors across its underground locale soon begins to drive you to distraction. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

After a promising opening, *Ghost Song* collapses under the weight of its ill-conceived mechanics.

49

Beautiful sights like these are few and far between.

Platforming is infrequent but unremittingly clunky.

LEFT: Several bosses can be outsmarted by standing on nearby ledges.

BELOW: Things go rapidly downhill after this strong opening.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

There are some lovely vistas, though fewer as the game goes on.

GARBAGE DAY

Bin there, dumped that in SUNSET SHIFT

You've been hired to shift garbage in this subtle but effective trucking sim, although there are certainly worse places you could perform the job. *Sunset Shift* is set on a beautiful island that has been commandeered by the rich elite, who holiday in villas in each of the island's four scattered towns. All you have to do – in a ridiculously well-paid job – is spend a couple of hours each day collecting their rubbish.

You spend the game in the confines of a bin lorry, navigating winding roads as you meander from town to town. The roads are well laid out, with the towns being built on a circuit that you can take clockwise or anti-clockwise, so you can more or less zone out and enjoy the chilled soundtrack as you do your job.

Outside each clutch of luxury villas there will be a skip full of rubbish, and if you stop in front of it it will be added to your load. You do this for every town – one skip for each town, at least to begin with – before you can offload it and return to the office.

There's a story, which I'll get to, but the actual trucking part of *Sunset Shift* involves doing this route repeatedly, as the days, weeks and eventually the years go by. Don't worry, there are time skips, but this is still a repetitive game, and I had to put on a podcast to get to the end.

Collecting four skips' worth of rubbish in one go isn't too bad, but by the end each town has *multiple* skips parked up outside it. The lorry can only carry four skips before it has to be unloaded, which brings me to the thorny issue of *where*.

The mounds of crap become bigger and more numerous

DOWN IN THE DUMPS

Your employer, and eventual love interest, tells you to just dump it anywhere. Find a spot away from roads and towns, and press the spacebar to dump it where you like.

Pretty soon, as time goes on, the mounds of crap become bigger and more numerous, and they begin to wither the trees. At the end of the game, the island is such a dump that it becomes uninhabitable.

Sunset Shift ends on a camera pull out, as you witness the damage that has been done to the environment by the villa owners – and yourself. But what's remarkable is that that's not what the narrative is about at all.

The narrative in *Sunset Shift* is told via frequent radio messages with your employer, and is a straight-faced, self-absorbed saga of privilege, recreational drug use and fleeting holiday entanglements. The island's ruin is on the periphery, briefly mentioned, and it only comes to focus in the final shot of the game.

It mirrors the climate crisis in the real world: from wacky conspiracy theory to impending apocalypse. *Sunset Shift* captures our selfishness, our collective willingness to turn a blind eye remarkably well. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game about driving a bin lorry round a beautiful island.

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Selkie Harbour

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

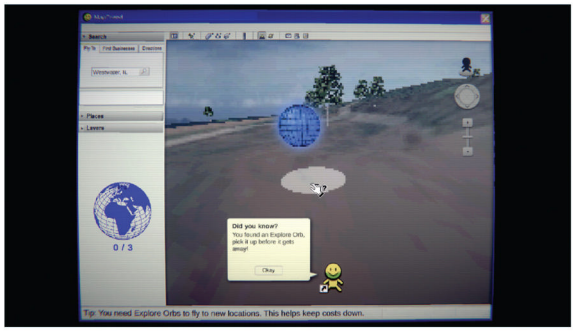
LINK
bit.ly/SunsetShift

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Sunset Shift is an incredibly subtle game with a strong message, but unfortunately it's a bit tedious to play.

76

BELOW: You'll unlock the next location once you've found every Explore Orb.



EARTH TO EARTH

MAPFRIEND makes a game out of Google Earth

Google Earth has finally been used for something other than finding your old house, or seeing if you were in the photo when the mapping car passed by. Yes, it's been turned into a horror game, where a dark secret hides behind a cute mascot and a low poly veneer.

The conceit is that this is Google Earth if it came about in the 1990s. So it has a delightfully boxy, Windows 95-style interface, and all the scenery is pixelated to hell. You can't explore the whole Earth, of course, but a few rural locations, which are barred on all sides by impassable barriers.

Mapfriend's framework is exceptional. As in real Google Earth, you explore each scene by dragging the camera around, and then clicking on the floor to advance forwards. You're trying to locate giant pins that will dole out 'fun facts' when clicked on. They'll also reveal gamey Explore Orbs, which you have to chase and collect to unlock the next location.

The '90s aesthetic is impeccable: the grey Windows windows, the pop-up mascot and the textures that warp when they're looked at. I just wish more of the interface was functional, as you can't interact with most of the buttons in the game.

When the horror comes, it's by cleverly glitching out that interface, taking you to unsettling locations and flashing up lore that suggests a dark backstory. I appreciate the brevity, but I would have also liked more of this horror element.

Fingers crossed *MapFriend*'s premise is eventually explored in much greater depth, as there's not quite enough of anything to sink your teeth into here right now. ■

70

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Adam Pype	bit.ly/MapFriend

FACE OFF

Beating a demon at his own game in FACE DOWN

You've made a deal with the demon who stole your partner's face: if you win at a game of cards, she'll be freed. But if you lose, the creature will add your face – and indeed your immortal soul – to his repertoire, slipping it on as easily as a mask.

It's a strong setup for a relatively simple card game, and the demon's taunting and grotesque appearance do a lot to reinforce that the outcome matters. Win, and the demon is bound to his word. Lose and you're bound to yours. I played twice and arrived at both (satisfying) outcomes.

Essentially, all you're doing is comparing cards. You can have two cards in your hand at once, and the highest number wins when one is plonked on the table. Every victory is worth points, and whoever reaches 100 points first wins.

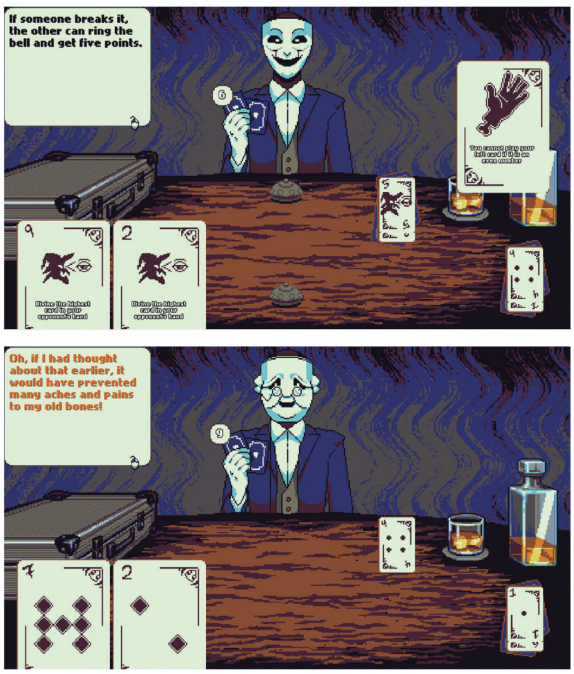
But the demon quickly makes things more interesting. He randomly applies rules that both sides have to abide by: you can't play two odd numbers in a row, you can't play your left card if it's even, that sort of thing. I reckon a game lasts 15 minutes, including two of these additional rules. That's more than enough, as it can be difficult to keep the rules at the front of your mind – they're only flashed up once.

If you break a rule, you can bet the face-nicking demon git will ring his bell and get five bonus points, so you have to be alert for him breaking the rules as well.

I don't think those rules are *especially* balanced, but I'm not complaining about my thrilling win. This is a macabre and tactical card game with one hell of a premise – and opponent. ■

79

BELOW: Certain cards let you see what's in your opponent's hand.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Pablo Rodríguez	bit.ly/FaceDownGame

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

Somehow it still looks slightly beige even when it's quite obviously green.

PANDORA'S GLOCKS

Grabbing more loot than I'll use in a lifetime in BORDERLANDS

These days we're used to games looking like Pixar designed an advert for the NRA. The likes of *Fortnite* and *Overwatch* casually mix bouncy, cartoon visuals with lethal assault weapons and we struggle to raise an eyebrow. But when *Borderlands* was originally released, it stood out against a canvas of muddy shooters with box art full of bald men standing with their backs facing the camera.

Visually, *Borderlands* still feels like rubbing popping candy in your eyes. The environments can sometimes feel brown and uninspiring, like finger food at a children's party, but the character design is always impeccable. Even when you accidentally end up hating a character, such as in the case of Claptrap, you can't help but admire the way they look. Throw in those splashy, explosive text intro screens and *Borderlands* becomes a game that already has to work hard if it's going to have enough substance to match the style.

Luckily, it just about manages it. Much like the game's design, the mix of stat-based gear grinding and first-person shooting has been borrowed and refined in the years after release. But it still slaps, even now. On a small level, there's a sense that neither shooting nor the procedural systems are as robust as they might be in a game that just did one thing well – the enemy AI, for instance, can be shockingly dull early one – but *Borderlands*' self-assured swagger provides enough of a distraction.

What kind of monster would want fewer guns? That would be me

LOOT BASKET

The thing that people love most about *Borderlands* is perhaps the thing that stresses me out the most. As you play the game you're bombarded by a selection of randomly-generated weapons, scaled to the level of your character. And this is obviously wonderful. What kind of monster would want *fewer* guns? That would be me, apparently. There's something weirdly stressful about being assailed by a series of uninformed decisions. By the time I've decided if I want the rifle with higher damage output or the one that sets enemies on fire, *Borderlands* has offered me two more alternatives. Sometimes, I've picked up another new gun before I've even had the chance to open my inventory. I realise that this is a very 'me' problem – and it might be precisely the reason it's taken me so many years to play such a critically acclaimed game – but it's the sort of thing that gives me decision fatigue. That sense of discovery does bring a deeper level of enjoyment to missions that might seem grindy otherwise, but at times it feels like *Borderlands* is an inquisitive toddler. Instead of asking rude questions about strangers they're offering you a selection of sniper rifles. I don't *know* what I want, *Borderlands*. Let me sleep. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The handsome centre of the *Fallout*/*Diablo* Venn diagram

EXPECT TO PAY
$39.95

DEVELOPER
Gearbox Software

PUBLISHER
2K

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

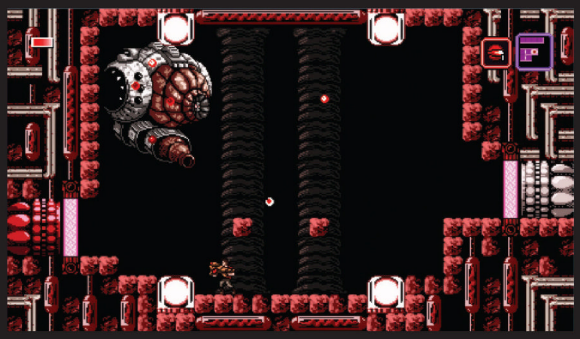
LINK
borderlands.com

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Even in a market flooded with beige post-apocalypse, *Borderlands* stands out as stylish, sassy and unique.

81

BELOW: The game has the kind of boss design that screams 'what if your genitals were an episode of Black Mirror?'



GLITCHY TASTY

Brilliant backtracking in the depths of AXIOM VERGE

Confession: this month's They're Back was always centred around *Axiom Verge*, but the initial plan was to pick two other grass-adjacent games to go with it. But I've already done *House Flipper* and the comedy lawnmower games leave me cold, so you're getting three games named after peripheries instead.

Axiom Verge has all the hallmarks of a classic indie Metroidvania in that it looks old in a way that old games never actually used to look, and it's bastard hard in a way that you only realise once it's too late and you're already addicted. It's the platforming equivalent of a multi-course meal in a restaurant, but instead of being fed fresh bread, you're getting a drill that lets you chop through obstructions. The variety of gadgets on offer is fun, too: there are coats that let you teleport and a tool that de-glitches inaccessible areas.

The central loop remains pleasantly distracting: you stumble across some esoteric obstruction, carry on exploring, then track back when you discover a gadget that will help you circumvent it. And while it doesn't expand massively on an established formula, it does everything so well that it feels unfair to ask for more, especially when you think about how everything here – gameplay graphics, and even music – come from the mind of one developer. The world of *Axiom Verge* is especially affecting: a bizarre, truly alien place that feels oddly unsettling, like stumbling across the wrong kind of arthouse animation as a youngster. It's an HR Giger-inspired nightmare, that only seems to get weirder the further down you delve. ■

83

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
$28.95	Thomas Happ Games LLC	In-house

GLASS CEILING

Relearning to run in MIRROR'S EDGE

There's a bit in James Cameron's classic sci-fi moisten-'em-up, The Abyss, in which a team of deep sea divers inhale a new type of liquid oxygen. It's a tortuous process that eventually allows them to visit areas inaccessible to divers using normal breathing apparatus. And it's very similar to relearning the controls in *Mirror's Edge*.

There's something about getting your claws around the game's controls that feels stilted and unnatural, especially for a game with impeccable visual precision. It's impossible to look at *Mirror's Edge* and not know exactly where you want to go. But the first 15 minutes of stop-start confusion makes you feel like a lonely grandma trying to navigate TikTok. In fairness, it's not necessarily the game's fault; more that everything we've played in the years since follows a standardised format. Once you acclimatise to the left-field controls, however, the experience still sings. There's something about the clarity of the world that feels refreshing. And Faith is the sort of protagonist you feel flattered to be in control of, even if all you tend to see are the cuffs of her crisp cargo pants and those toe shoes that only sociopaths wear.

When it flows, it feels incredible. But, by necessity, Mirror's Edge has to occasionally slow you down, and it does suck out the momentum. Combat sections lack the polished immediacy of the free-running bits, and there's an element of trial and error that feels crushingly uncool. As brilliant as *Mirror's Edge* often is, it's hard to unconditionally love it when you're falling off a skyscraper for the 14th time. ■

72

BELOW: A bit more orange and this could be a *Sunset Overdrive* screenshot.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
$29.95	DICE	Electronic Arts

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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YO[illegible]MES DESERVE

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Intel vs AMD – which CPU is right for your machine?

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Why are graphics cards getting so expensive? We investigate.

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It's time to make your hardware New Year's resolutions!

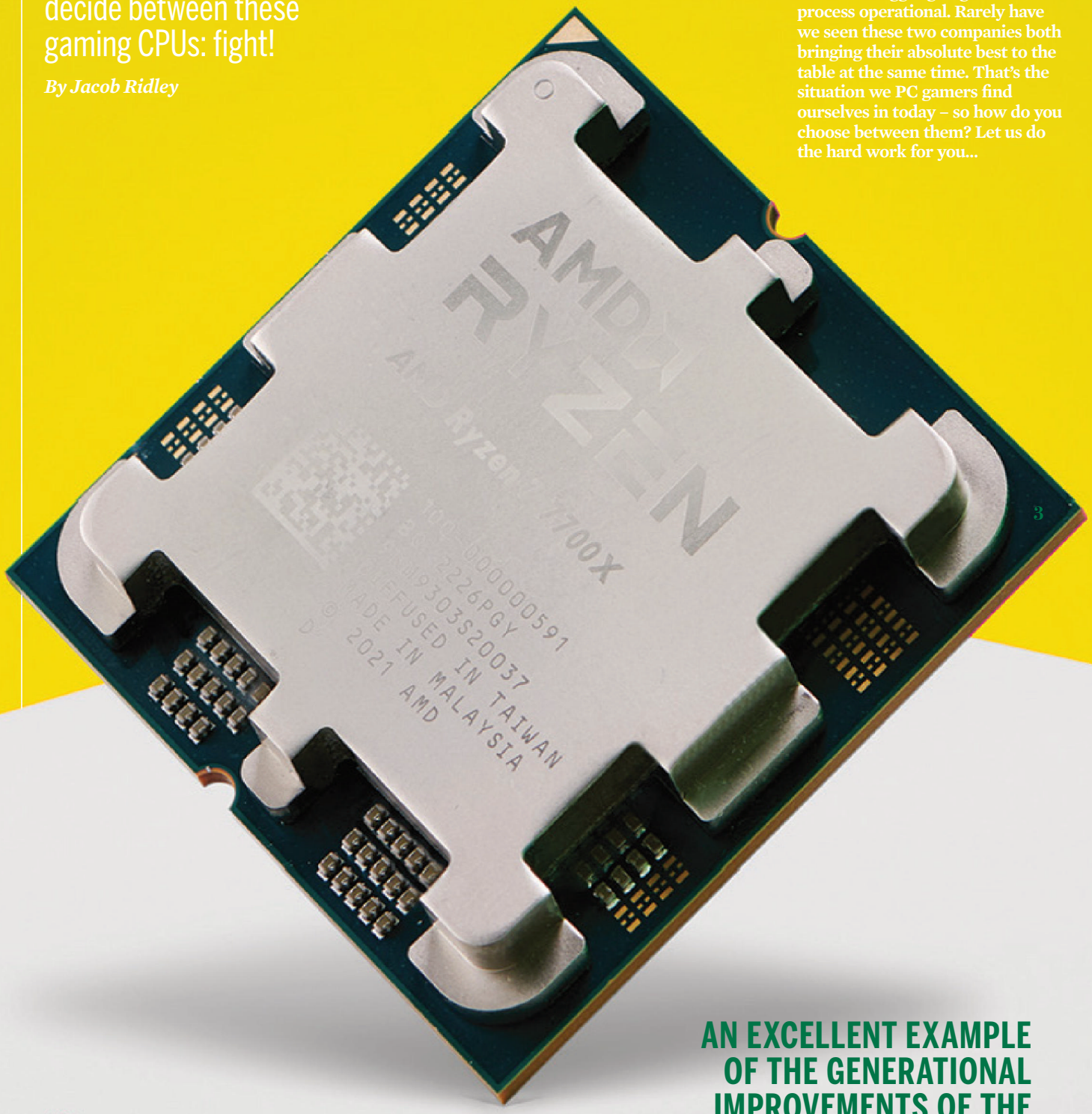
GROUP TEST

AMD VS INTEL

There's only one way to decide between these gaming CPUs: fight!

By Jacob Ridley

AMD and Intel have never been more fiercely competitive with each other in gaming than they are today. There have been many times throughout silicon history when you could point to a make or break moment for one of these sides: AMD during the early '00s, or Intel struggling to get a new process operational. Rarely have we seen these two companies both bringing their absolute best to the table at the same time. That's the situation we PC gamers find ourselves in today – so how do you choose between them? Let us do the hard work for you...



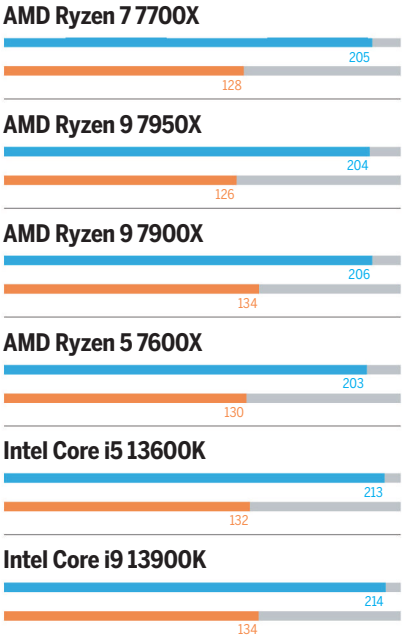
1

AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF THE GENERATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS OF THE ZEN 4 ARCHITECTURE

BENCHMARKS

Total War: Three Kingdoms @ 1080p (fps) (higher is better)

Metro Exodus @ 1080p (fps) (higher is better)



Ryzen 7 7700X

AMD **$529**

8-core/16-thread

1 On the face of it the Ryzen 7 7700X is maybe the least exciting of all the new Zen 4 chips from AMD. The Ryzen 9 7950X has the benefit of being cheaper and faster than its predecessor, and comes rocking the highest thread count of any chip out there. And the Ryzen 5 7600X is the highest clocked mainstream CPU around and is just $399.

A $529 eight-core, 16-thread CPU in 2022 seems kinda passé.

Yet in some gaming cases it will actually match the top-end $899 Ryzen 7000-series CPU, which is certainly not something you can ignore when you're looking for a new chip.

The Ryzen 7 7700X is still an excellent example of the generational improvements of the Zen 4 architecture. This third-tier chip is pretty regularly beating the cache-heavy special edition CPU of the last generation, and that was the best gaming processor AMD had ever made. It's efficient, incredibly fast and can easily deliver on the gaming front. But as we'll see often with Zen 4, not always a match for Intel's 13th Gen in gaming.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Better than a 5800X3D
- → Eco Mode is ace
- → Struggles against Intel's latest

SPECS CORES: 8 / **THREADS:** 16 / **MAX BOOST:** 5.4GHZ / **OVERCLOCKABLE:** YES / **TDP:** 105W

Ryzen 9 7950X

AMD **$899**

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

16-core/32-thread

2 If the idea of spending just about $900 on a CPU for your gaming machine fills you with dread, look away now. The Ryzen 9 7950X is no cheap chip, and admittedly for our humble gaming needs we could get away with a whole lot cheaper than this. However, the Ryzen 9 7950X offers something nothing else can: 16 Zen 4 cores.

It is certainly fast. I actually did a bit of a double take checking out the numbers when I saw the Cinebench R23 single thread run tipping the odd core up to 5.9GHz. Even stable at 5.8GHz was pretty shocking. It's not quite that high under all-core load, but 5.4GHz across all 16 cores still makes the Ryzen 9 7950X one blazing chip.

But it's still not the processor I'd pick up today and there's a chance it might get savaged out there for being more of a derivative than a revolutionary CPU. There's no spectacular new tech on display, no vertically bonded cache chips, no extra cores, just a healthy clock speed bump, some finessed microarchitecture and a new socket.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Monstrous multithreading
- → $100 more than 5950X
- → Do you need a 16-core CPU?

SPECS CORES: 16 / **THREADS:** 32 / **MAX BOOST:** 5.7GHZ / **OVERCLOCKABLE:** YES / **TDP:** 170W

Ryzen 9 7900X

AMD $739

12-core/24-thread

3 If the $700 Ryzen 9 is slightly out of reach of your pocket book, the slightly more sensible Ryzen 9 7900X is the more parsimonious pick. With 12 cores and 24 threads, you can reasonably expect excellent performance out of it for both gaming and content creation. Or both at the same time.

In our testing the Ryzen 9 7900X is in the middle of the pack when it comes to performance in games, sitting under the Ryzen 9 7950X and Ryzen 7 7700X in average frame rate. But we're also talking a frame or two difference in most games, so hardly a major loss.

The real defeat comes in the form of Intel's Core i5 13600K, which is convincingly ahead of the Ryzen 9 7900X in most gaming scenarios. It's also pretty close in Cinebench R23, but that's not an exact determination of its multithreaded performance. The Ryzen 9 7900X is better suited to rendering tasks, such as Blender and X264. That's why I'd say this is a chip for anyone with one foot in gaming and the other in actually making the games.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Perfect core count
- Still quick in games
- Intel's so competitive here

SPECS CORES: 12 / **THREADS:** 24 / **MAX BOOST:** 5.6GHZ / **OVERCLOCKABLE:** YES / **TDP:** 170W

Ryzen 5 7600X

AMD $399

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

6-core/12-thread

4 The baby of the bunch, the Ryzen 5 7600X. It's a tough job having to follow up the Ryzen 5 5600X – a chip we absolutely adored for its affordability in the face of rising costs elsewhere in building a gaming PC. Six cores are plenty for mid-range gaming, too. Little has changed in that department, the Ryzen 5 7600X also offers six cores and 12 threads. However, AMD's Zen 4 brings with it some key improvements.

The 7600X runs up to 5.3GHz, which only a few years back would've been reserved for only the most expensive chips. Even at its slowest, it's a 4.7GHz chip. That's mighty impressive when you consider the Ryzen 5 5600X would only *boost* to 4.6GHz. That's less than the 7600X's base clock! All of which contributes to a fairly significant upgrade in gaming performance over even the Ryzen 9 5950X, let alone the 5600X. Though it's not all rosy, my biggest complaint with this chip is that it's just a lot more money than its predecessor right now, for both the chip and the new AM5 motherboard with it.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Great for gaming
- 5.3GHz Boost!
- Bit too pricey right now

SPECS CORES: 6 / **THREADS:** 12 / **MAX BOOST:** 5.3GHZ / **OVERCLOCKABLE:** YES / **TDP:** 105W

YOU WANT THE FASTEST CHIP AROUND, HERE IT IS

GROUP TEST

Core i5 13600K

INTEL **$539**

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

14-core/20-thread

5 The Intel Core i5 13600K isn't a Core i5. OK, it *is* a Core i5, but calling it that almost feels a disservice to everything this chip offers.

In three out of six games I've tested it matches the pace of the Core i9 12900K. As if that's not enough, it defeats AMD's Ryzen 7 7700X in all but a single game (*Shadow of the Tomb Raider*) and it doesn't let up in more productivity/creative workloads, including Blender and x264. In fact, the Core i5 13600K is only 12% shy of the i9 12900K in the Cinebench R23 multicore benchmark. Even when it comes to power efficiency, which is not Intel's forte, the Core i5 13600K's sensible clock speeds and core counts make for a much more efficient chip than the Core i9 13900K. Ultimately, the Core i5 13600K is much more of an all-round powerhouse than I had expected it to be, delivering only a handful of frames less than chips that fetch for double the asking price.

For a gaming PC build in 2023, this is absolutely the chip I'd recommend to most.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → The best CPU right now
- → Performs like a Core i9
- → Hotter than last-gen

SPECS CORES: 6+8 / **THREADS:** 20 / **MAX BOOST:** 5.1GHZ / **OVERCLOCKABLE:** YES / **TDP:** 125–181W

Core i9 13900K

INTEL **$1,049**

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

24-core/32-thread

6 Intel's Core i9 13900K is spectacularly good at what it does, and what it does is pretty much everything. Gaming? Of course, it can push high frame rates alongside the latest GPUs. Multitasking? Yep, easy. With 24 cores it's perfectly suited to lots of stuff happening all at once. High-demand creative workloads? Absolutely.

Now for some PC builders it's an easy buy. You want the fastest chip around, here it is. But I would suggest that most PC gamers with a moderate budget will want to look at the Intel Core i5 13600K instead. There are a few ways you *could* justify buying one of these killer chips. However, the Core i9 13900K comes with 32 threads to throw at whatever you're working on, which is handy if you're doing more than gaming. It makes light work of editing and rendering tasks, and you can leave those sorts of workloads going in the background while you get on with other stuff. It's also great at gaming, of course, posting the best frame rates we've seen, ever.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Fastest in games
- → Mighty multithreaded performance
- → Do you really need it?

SPECS CORES: 8+16 / **THREADS:** 32 / **MAX BOOST:** 5.8GHZ / **OVERCLOCKABLE:** YES / **TDP:** 125–253W

Nvidia's latest gen of cards are specced for creators and engineers too – if they can grab one.

YOU'VE BEEN FRAMED

GPUs are now $2,000+ investments. How did we get here?

Cometh the hour, cometh the bombastic marketing campaign from Nvidia. Acronyms are thrown at you and you're encouraged to nod along at comparison wipes in games while RTX and DLSS are toggled on and off. This one's got 9728 CUDA cores – how many's yours got? That few? No no, that won't do. You need this new one now. And it's yours for $2,500.

No matter how hard Nvidia's PR teams have worked on the launch of team green's new RTX 40-series cards, there's still just one spec that stands out and it's the price. The flagship 4080 card costs twice that of its predecessor, the RTX 3080, which retailed for $1,139 at launch in September 2020.

Of course, buying a graphics card for something close to MSRP in 2020 was as likely as leaving your house for anything other than exercise or letting a stranger's cough in a public place go without mention. Market factors including but not limited to crypto surges and crashes, a semiconductor shortage, and the fact we were all stuck at home with nothing to do but upgrade our PCs inflated graphics card prices to absurd degrees.

But those market factors have largely diminished. We're leaving our houses again, crypto has crashed, electricity prices have surged, and semiconductor production is at least in motion again. So how did Jensen's lot arrive at that price for the Founder's Edition of the 4080?

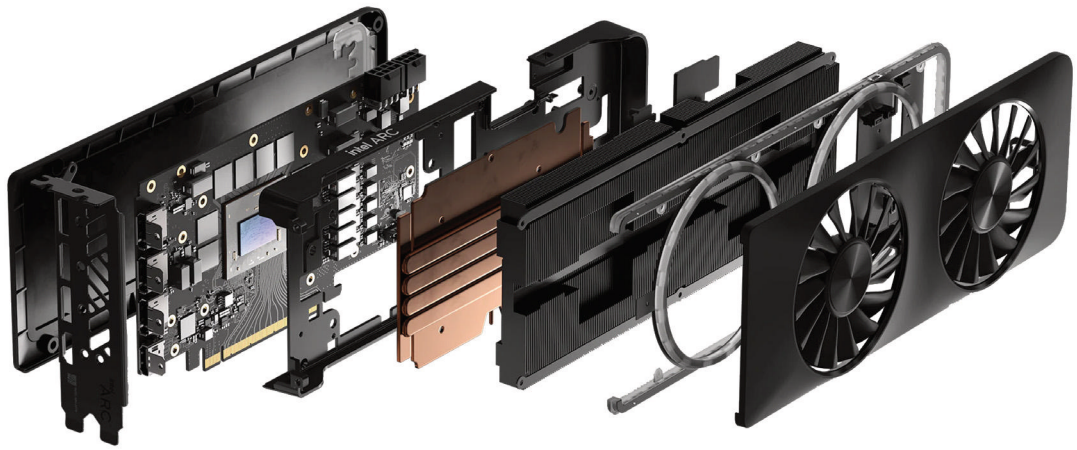
CUDA SHAKER

Nvidia blames Moore's Law. As we discussed last month in the hardware pages, it's been dead for years, and as Jensen Huang told PC World recently, that means increasing performance costs a lot more, "First of all, a 12-inch wafer is a lot more expensive today than it was yesterday. And it's not a little bit more expensive, it is a ton more expensive.

"Moore's law is dead. And the ability for Moore's law to deliver the same performance, half the cost every year and a half is over. It's completely over. And so the idea that the chip is going to go down in cost over time, unfortunately is a story of the past."

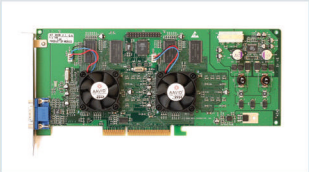
Huang's referring to the AD102 chip powering the new 40-series cards, which admittedly packs a huge amount onto a 608mm^2 die size. While AMD's latest cards look to using chiplets in a bid for higher yield and thus lower costs, Nvidia only seems interested in making a massive performance gain. Hang the cost.

But there are conflicting stories here. While card manufacturers aren't in the habit of releasing their bill of materials (BOM) for new units and TSMC, the semiconductor maker, doesn't reveal the details of the chips it supplies to the likes of Nvidia, that hasn't stopped



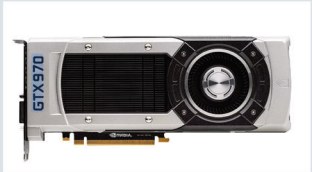
LEFT: Intel's entered the ring with its ARC GPUs, at a much lower price point. There's hope yet.

DIE SHRINKFLATION *The price hike's absurd trajectory*



1996
3DFX VOODOO, $299
The first fully 3D integrated GPU to enter the market cost 300 bucks.

2007
NVIDIA GEFORCE 8800GTS, $350
A decade later, a more sophisticated piece of PCB for $50 more.



2015
NVIDIA GTX 970, $529
Another decade's leap, another essential GPU for under 350.

2023
NVIDIA RTX 4080 FE, $2,400
Now we do a comedy spit-take every time we look at the Nvidia website.

some industry insiders approximating the manufacturing cost of the 4080. One such figure alleges a cost of US$300 – around US$150 for the AD102 chip, plus the cost of the GGDR6X memory and the PCB.

Speculation like that's unlikely to ever be answered definitively, but it feels much likelier that cultural factors have enabled this massive price jump. Even if the cost of packing all that new performance onto the die has jumped, Nvidia still decided to go ahead and meet those financial demands in order to hit a price point that the company knew would be way higher than anything that came before it.

IT'S OUR FAULT

And it probably did so because it had watched Nvidia cards skyrocket in value, way beyond MSRP, for years previous. Every time someone bought an Nvidia card on eBay in 2019 for twice the retail because crypto miners had bought them all at launch; every stock drop that sold out in minutes at an inflated price due to the sheer scarcity of cards in 2020 and 2021, they all sent a message to Nvidia. And that message was: turns out people will pay a lot more for these things than we're charging.

Graphics cards became an unlikely addition to drop culture. Supreme t-shirts, a new run of Nike LeBron Witness 6 basketball boots, an RTX 3070 – the principles were just the same: get it right now, whatever the price, because you're paying for the privilege of getting something rare and coveted. See also: the PlayStation 5.

But just like a pair of Jordans, which you can either seal in a bag forever or take $100 off their value for every step you take, the practical benefits to owning such a phenomenally powerful and pricy card don't really tally.

GAMES FROM FIVE YEARS AGO LOOK PRETTY MUCH LIKE GAMES TODAY

CARDS ON THE TABLE

In other words: it's not 1998. The pace of innovation in depicting the 3D worlds we inhabit isn't akin to the mind-melting polygonal arms race of the Voodoo era, and games from five years ago look pretty much like games released today. The titles Nvidia itself uses to promote the 4080's merits aren't particularly new themselves: *Control*. *Cyberpunk*. Even *Portal 2* gets trotted out, in ray-traced finery.

If you're feeling especially cynical, that proposition looks like: we're still working on getting these games to run really fast. Want to pay upwards of a grand every few years to see our progress? Of course, it is genuinely exciting to see the fidelity of a PC title evolve over time, to watch its untapped potential slowly revealed. But we're talking about a very small niche of triple-A titles that hardly anybody can afford to make anymore, and which take so many years to produce that they're actually becoming thin on the ground. And we're being asked to build sensationally expensive machines on a regular basis for them. Otherwise, we've just spent $2,500 and then gone back to playing *PUBG*, *Elden Ring*, and *Football Manager* at exactly the same graphics settings as before because there was absolutely no performance issue in the first place with the games we regularly spend time in. And that would be bordering on silly. Gulp. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

AULD LAN SYNE

New year's resolutions for the hardware-obsessed

The dawning of a fresh year is traditionally a time of introspection and inner growth. A time to nurture one's inner stoic, take an honest inventory of your failings and unfulfilled ambitions, and to give them form. This is a new year. You haven't done any of the bad things yet. Alright, it's still so early in 2023 that you're using the sunlight in the day to prepare a breakfast of leftover chocolates and stuffing, but you've got the fire under you. This year, you're going to do it.

You're going to do... something or other. What nobody tells you about new year's resolutions until you're too old and unmotivated to act on it is that the trickiest part is deciding on an undertaking that's actually worth committing to. What kind of positive habit or personal growth endeavour takes 12 months to realistically achieve, but remains in the sphere of your possible accomplishments? There's got to be more to self-improvement than doing deadlifts in Fitness First among the crowds for the first two weeks of January and then watching 22 untouched direct debits leave your account over the next two years.

IN YOUR HANDS

Perhaps it's better to foster an atmosphere of gently improving who you already are, rather than trying to prod a doughy, slumping blob through an MCU character-shaped hole. Your hardware habits, for example. Should you be spending less on exorbitantly priced graphics cards, or more? Graphics make you happy, after all. Higher frame rates are the point of life. Still, if Nvidia keeps raising its MSRPs, the next generation of RTX cards will cost even more that Fitness First membership you're bound to until 2025.

YOU WILL ACTUALLY TURN OFF YOUR DESKTOP MACHINE WHEN YOU'RE DONE

No, you've got it: you're going to use your propensity for buying more stuff for the PC gaming corner for good. You're going to spend your money on a Steam Deck, so that you can tackle your library of shame – it stopped being a pile in 2016 – with real vigour.

This is good. It means you can now feasibly go back to your Witcher 3 save and get the expansions done while you're on the train back from work. You're budgeting yourself in two ways, galvanising against the effects of the third recession of your adult life by not only playing your existing games instead of buying new ones, but taking upgrades out of the conversation. You've bought a Steam Deck, and that's all there is to it. This is where the PC gaming happens now.

Like some sort of motivation snowball, you find yourself propelled by newfound energy to look for even greater improvements to your relationship with PC gaming. This will be the year, you mouth to yourself silently in the bathroom mirror one morning, that you will actually turn off your desktop machine when you're done with it instead of letting it go into sleep mode.

You get to googling gaming PC energy expenditure figures. You read somewhere that gaming consumes up to 75 billion kWh of electricity annually worldwide, despite making up only 2.5% of the globally installed PC equipment database. That's $10 billion of energy expenditure, the website tells you. Enough to power 25 electrical plants for a year. The $0.03 you're saving per day by turning yours off instead of letting it consume 4W in sleep mode isn't going to fund your gap year, but you might be doing the planet a solid.

LIGHTS OUT

And then you look around. The LED light strips under your desk, behind your monitor, tastefully lining your shelf of

PHIL IWANIUK
Six pack abs, glistening white teeth, the hairline of a ten-year-old... just some of the things Phil Iwaniuk has tried to sell you in his advertising day job. Doctors hate him.

PLAY IT FORWARD *Four gaming charities you can give to in 2023*

SPECIAL EFFECT
Organisation specialising in making gaming accessible for anyone with disabilities.

ABLEGAMERS
All about conquering social isolation through play. Like Special Effect, they help disabled gamers to play too.

AWESOME GAMES DONE QUICK
Hosts speedrun marathons to raise money, then gives that money to charities.

BROADCASTHER INITIATIVE
Part of the 1,000 Dreams Fund, dedicated to giving female voices more opportunities across the games industry.

vintage movie figurines. The Nanoleaf RGB panels you saw on a streamer's setup and then bought for yourself, cycling through their programmed colour patterns. Your keyboard, like an aerial shot of a large city at night. How did it get like this? You used to just use the shared family PC to play some games on. There was no unified aesthetic to the space where you played, you just sat down and got on with it. And you were happy.

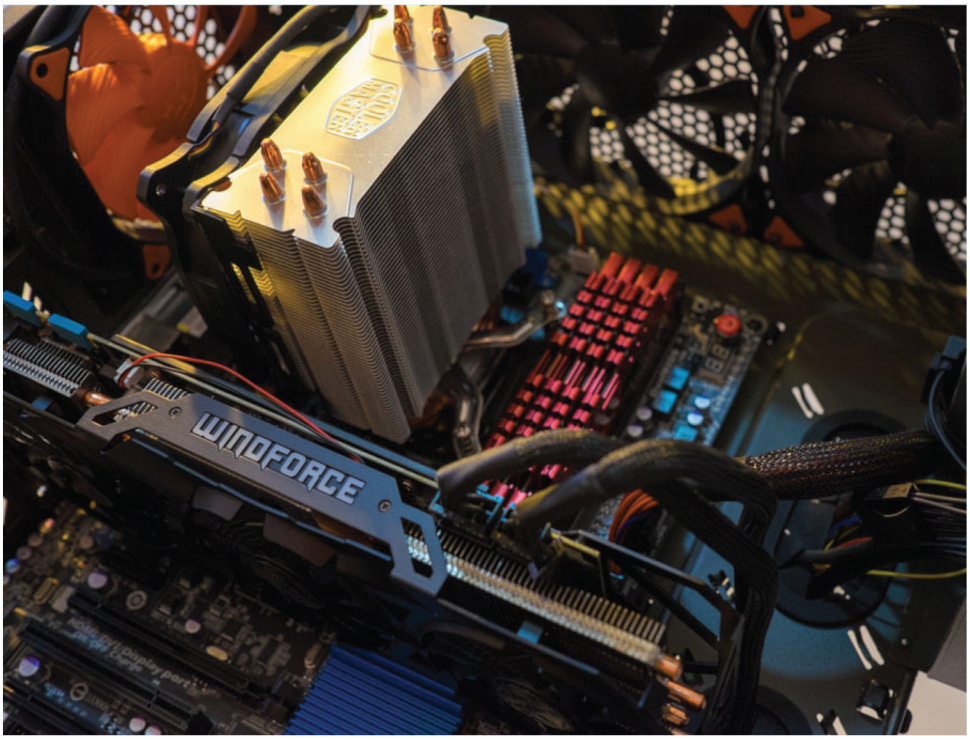
It's time to strip down the whole setup. With all the spare components you have, the bits that were displaced by upgrades over the last few years, you start building a whole PC. You discover that you actually have everything except a case, an SSD and a PSU. So you buy them – so long, resolution of fiscal responsibility – and you turn all your old parts into an actual, working PC. You give it to one of your mates. And they love it. They absolutely love it.

It's February by now. You still don't look like somebody from the MCU and your Monzo still tells you off. But in some way, you feel like 2023 is going alright so far... ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: New year, new me, new PC. Er, if I can afford it.

BELOW: Old PCs are gold mines of gear you can donate.



EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

“I did what any other human would do – I razed the thing to the ground”

Trying my damn best to unwind in DISNEY DREAMLIGHT VALLEY

I’ll level with you, I’ve been stressed out lately. I do not handle stress well. It’s times like these where I need something low-effort, something that keeps me out of the deadly gamer limbo – come on, you know the one. Where you still want to stay engaged with your hobby but can’t be bothered to even hold a mouse half the time. Thankfully, *Disney Dreamlight Valley* has been doing a bang-up job of being my crutch in these hard times.

There’s a criterion when I’m trying to combat the dreaded gamer limbo. The game needs to be interesting enough to hold my attention, but low-stakes so I can play while watching the same three Netflix shows on my second monitor. It needs to fully embody my ‘no thoughts’ mindset, allowing me to barely exert my last brain cell fighting in the trenches. I don’t need a game further poking its stress-laden fingertips into my pudgy stomach.

MOLLIE TAYLOR

THIS MONTH
Watched Donald Duck have many, many tantrums.

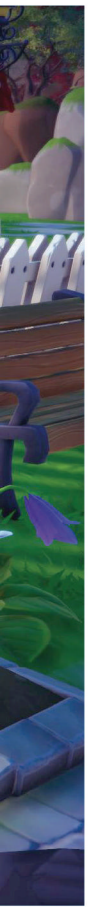
ALSO PLAYED
Overwatch 2, *The Sims 4*

I feel a bit bad, because I’d previously written off *Disney Dreamlight Valley* as a game for two demographics: children, and those whose love for the House of Mouse borders on slightly terrifying. I am neither. All this was despite several colleagues telling me it was actually, finally a good *Animal Crossing*-like on PC. After a particularly stressful day, I listened and grabbed it on Game Pass.

TOP: Get your finger outta your mouth, Minnie.

Turns out, I am the exact type of person *Disney Dreamlight Valley* wants to ensnare in its night thorns. Sure, it’s a Disney game, one that bigger fans than I will have a deeper appreciation for. But it’s a damn good life sim to boot. I tinkered around in its character creator for ages before being whisked away to a dark, thorny valley. It was... not what I had expected. I thought everything would be fun and bright, smiling at me with shiny white veneers. I mean, it kind of does eventually. But you’ve got to work for it.

I AM THE EXACT TYPE OF PERSON DISNEY DREAMLIGHT VALLEY WANTS TO ENSNARE



CLEANING UP

I spent the next several hours cleaning up thorns, planting crops, and recruiting Disney icons to live and work in my humble little village. Soon, I noticed something. Almost every single object in the valley could be picked up, moved, or deleted. So I did what any other reasonable human would do – I razed the entire thing to the ground.

This isn't like *Animal Crossing*, where the game purposefully slows your efforts to deforest and aesthetically annihilate a total island. This was like, five minutes tops. Without thinking, I had given myself a blank canvas to do with as I pleased. Now, this! This was relaxing! Acres of grass and nothing but my own imagination to hold me back. Except, my imagination stinks. Plus I was veering close to having to use more than one brain cell.

It's a blessing that *Disney Dreamlight Valley* sports a simple decorating system. All grid-based, no diagonal rotations. With a small furniture pool and limited placement, I whipped something up in no time. I stepped back, looked at my work and realised I had somehow played this game for 12 hours in a row. Oops. At least I'm less stressed now. ■

"It loves to throw supervillains at you"

Making enemies in MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

ROBIN VALENTINE

THIS MONTH
Tried to clean symbiote gunk out of spandex.

ALSO PLAYED
Marvel Snap, Nadir, Legends of Runeterra

I've lamented before in these pages that one of the key things almost all superhero games get wrong is their enemies. You play as these hugely powerful icons, but usually spend all your time fighting generic goons or boring robots – I'm looking at you, *Marvel's Avengers*.

Such encounters are dry, lacking the drama of a comic book storyline, and often they mess with the power fantasy, slapping huge healthbars on nameless soldiers that make even Mjolnir feel feeble. It's largely a concession to the medium – videogames, the logic presumably goes, need a steady stream of fights against a set library of reusable foes, with enough challenge to make you feel engaged. But the result is a whole history of superhero games that don't feel superheroic. Thankfully, *Marvel's Midnight Suns* breaks the mould.

THUG LIFE

Generic mooks have only a single hitpoint, allowing you to mow them down with ease – perfect power fantasy fodder. They're shepherded by more elite troopers, but rather than just being tougher than their kin, they fill very distinct roles that give them personality and purpose, and go some way to justifying their resilience against a superhero team.

Fights against just nameless foes like these are satisfying on their own – but what really makes *Midnight Suns* work is that it loves to throw proper supervillains at you.

The likes of Venom and Sabertooth show up multiple times each in the story, each time with a different twist, before being defeated in a special final mission tailored around their powers, weaknesses, and relationships with the members of your team. Even better, for as long as one is active, they can ambush you during other missions – simply turning up to pitch a seemingly routine side activity into chaos. Over repeated encounters you get to know their tricks, try different strategies against them, and build a strange kind of rivalry with them – just like a proper superhero's rogue's gallery.

By letting each villain be more than one just some cutscenes and a boss fight, *Midnight Suns* fosters a wonderfully authentic comic book feel – and far more exciting and satisfying battles. ■

"See, you don't know for sure that people are, in fact, dead"

Gods, demons, and jazz make PARADISE KILLER'S world a perfect mystery playground

P*aradise Killer* passed me by when it originally launched in 2021, but I was frequently told I'd love it for its murder mystery and surreal twists – and I'm glad I finally gave in and gave it a try.

IMOGEN MELLOR

THIS MONTH
Returned from thousands of years of exile.

ALSO PLAYED
Overwatch 2, God of War

You play as Lady Loves Dies, an immortal just now coming back to this society after thousands of years of exile. Gods and demons exist, and your class of humanoids are somewhere in between the two. The council of the island have a lovely tradition of murdering its entire human population every so often to gain enough power to make another island, hoping to eventually create a home which is perfect. So it's a murder mystery with a large helping of religious fanatics, the undercurrent of genocide, and jazzy tunes.

The murder itself is just as odd. See, you don't know for sure that people are, in fact, dead. A man possessed by a demon escapes his prison, runs to where the council of this island are finishing up their centennial killing of thousands, and then the possessed man is found with the blood of council members in his stomach. The council never leaves the room where they were conducting the ritual, so it leads most to believe that they are dead. But we can't get in the room because it's magically locked.

Assuming the murder did happen, the possessed man isn't even the only suspect. There are lots of other people on the island to investigate. You look for clues and try to become closer to the island's inhabitants so they spill dirt on their peers. And at any point in the story you can go back to The Judge with your findings and accuse someone of the murder if you think you've cracked it.

YOU LOOK FOR CLUES AND TRY TO BECOME CLOSER TO THE ISLAND'S INHABITANTS

HEAVEN SENT

I've been in no rush to make a conclusion so far, though – I'm loving meeting all the island's strange inhabitants and rooting out its many secrets. Unlike many detective games I've encountered, it has a focus on exploring a physical world. You spot something in the distance and parkour your way over to investigate.

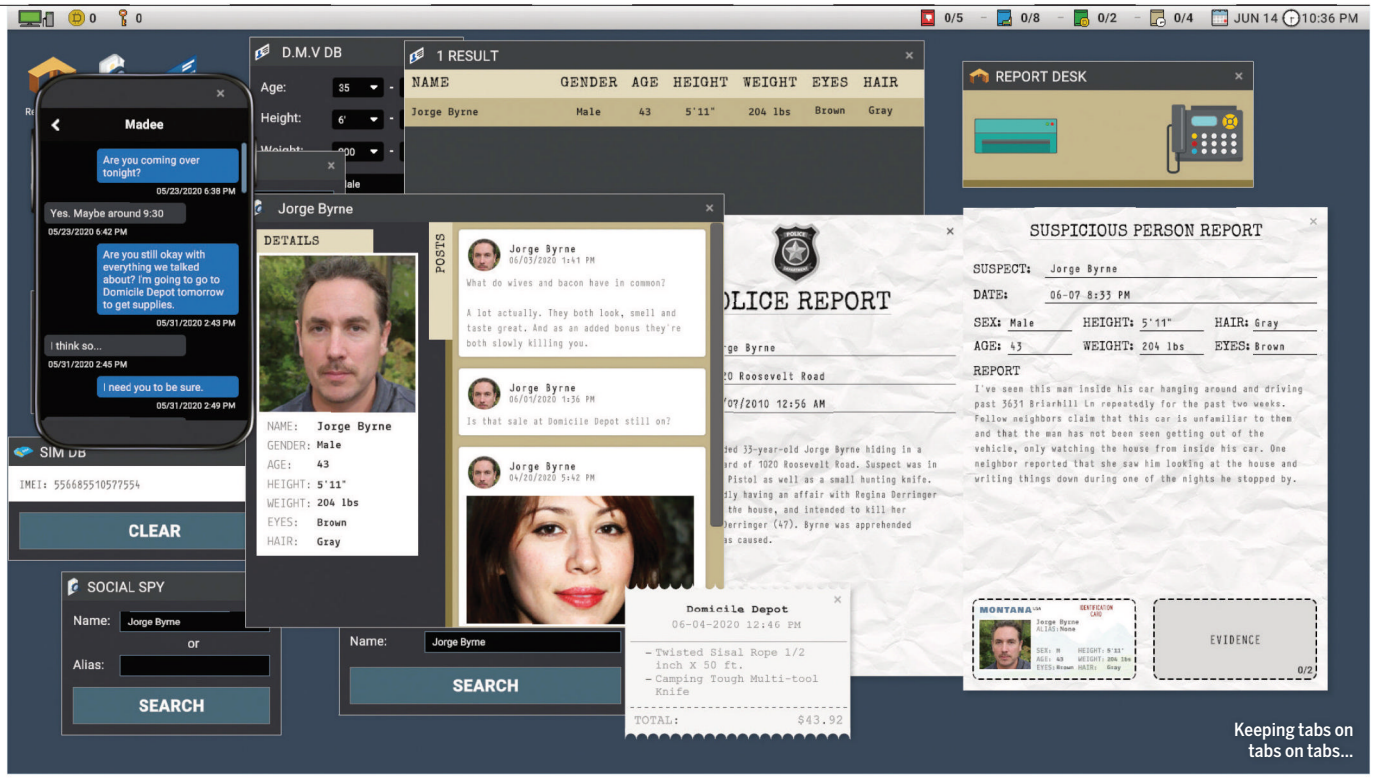
The lore of *Paradise Killer* is deliciously deep for an indie game of this scope. This world is so unlike a normal detective game's because of its immortal inhabitants – relationships between characters can go back thousands of years, and follow an almost dream-like logic. One character's flesh melted off when he was stabbed because he burned so intensely with love of the enemy who had killed him. They're now a happy couple, though one of them is a red skeleton.

The camp, vibrant, gaudy aesthetic and off-beat lore all make it a very compelling experience. It's so different and new, so fresh and funky, I fell in love in a matter of minutes. ■

As prisons go, this isn't so bad

LEFT: I wonder if the housing market is affected by the whole ritual killing thing?

BELOW: It's called fashion darling, look it up.



Keeping tabs on tabs on tabs...

"There's about 200 incident reports in a random order to pore over"

The magic of technology sees the hunter become the hunted in SCRUTINISED

With its *Welcome to The Game* titles seeing you painstakingly trawl the dark web for codes hidden in its disturbing sites, Reflect Studios has web-based horror down to a fine-tuned, almost obnoxiously detailed art. This time sidestepping the dark web to focus on a local neighbourhood watch group, *Scrutinised* is so ripe with unsettling details it includes a no-death Detective Mode so you can take them all in properly.

Detective Mode shifts gears from a survive the night style set-up to good old-fashioned investigative fun. Like a really messed up hidden object game. *Scrutinised* already has less enemies to worry about than *Welcome To The Game 2*, but even playing with no enemies it's still thematically horror of the real world variety. There's domestic violence, murder, kidnap, and some disgusting niches to be filtered out from the red herrings created by the neighbourhood watch's overzealous distrust of rock music and, well, anyone a bit different from themselves.

MAX WILLIAMS

THIS MONTH
Spied on the neighbours for a personal vendetta.

ALSO PLAYED
House Flipper

ALWAYS WATCHING

By bringing the focus solely to the cases, Detective Mode makes the horror about how the consequences of your actions may affect innocent people. Guys sneaking up on you to kill you while you sit at your computer is terrifying, but this subtler fear of your own responsibility is potent.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH'S OVERZEALOUS DISTRUST OF ROCK MUSIC

Detective Mode is no cakewalk either. Sometimes someone is obviously shifty but you can't figure out the right evidence to prove it. Sometimes you get tired of waiting to retry hacking a phone and just shred the paper to be done with it. Even familiarising yourself with the cases this way doesn't make playing the actual version of the game significantly easier, as there's about 200 incident reports in a random order to pore over.

With *Scrutinised* and both *Welcome to the Game* titles confirmed to be taking place around each other, I can't help but wonder if somewhere in those case files there might be a reference to one of the many disturbing websites *Welcome To The Game* has you trawl through, or perhaps even allusions to the events of the story. Of course, my good friend Detective Mode is the best way to make it through all the files to find out! Tripping over remembering which cases need to be filed and how to do so successfully aside, that is. Perhaps I've been my own worst enemy all along? ■

CYBERPUNK 2077

Cyberpunk was good, but its biggest issues remain. *By Ted Lichfield*

I've been a *Cyberpunk 2077* liker since launch. I never had to face the grim depravity of its last-gen console versions, and while not the best way to play, I enjoyed my time with it on a PC built in 2016. It was still an unwieldy, uneven game though, one that shined despite its flaws like a classic Black Isle or Troika offering. After my first playthrough, I eagerly awaited the expansion that I knew could really make it sing.

Two years post-launch, that expansion, *Phantom Liberty*, is still a ways off, though *Cyberpunk* did get quests, gear, and QoL changes on the order of *The Witcher 3*'s celebrated free DLC. With the wave of goodwill for the game following the Edgerunners anime and its big 1.5 and 1.6 updates, now seemed like the perfect time to revisit the dark future and get a character ready for *Phantom Liberty*.

I found the game I loved back in 2020 remains as engaging as ever, with fantastic quest design and a charismatic cast, but the additions CD Projekt has made only pick at the edges of my biggest issues with *Cyberpunk*: its stultifying, MMO-style progression and unreactive world.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
December 10, 2020

DEVELOPER
CD Projekt Red

PUBLISHER
CD Projekt

LINK
cyberpunk.net

Even with two years of tinkering, *Cyberpunk*'s gear system makes me feel like I'm sucking on a firehose of grey, blue, green and purple drops, each one with ballooning, opaquely-calculated stats attached to it. When I'm playing a first-person, open world RPG, I want unique, prized weapons like the Ranger Sequoia in *New Vegas* or Chillrend from *Skyrim*.

Patch 1.5 added a sick unique katana called Byakko – it's a reward for a drawn out quest line, looks cool as hell, and lets you lunge at enemies from far away. After acquiring it, I almost immediately started seeing generic katanas with higher DPS stats. It doesn't feel good to have something that dope, that hard-won come with an expiration date, and *Cyberpunk*'s weapon upgrading is so time and resource-intensive that I just threw up my hands and got a mod to make gear auto-level with me.

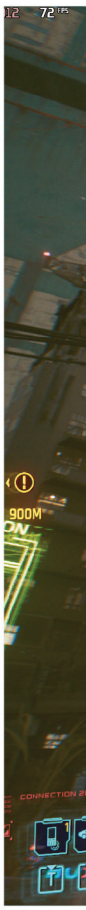
FUTURE FASHION

The deluge of vendor trash has had some of its impact lessened with the introduction of transmog in patch 1.6. It's an intuitive system, with every new piece of armour you pick up added to your wardrobe. CDPR's been great at armour design since the first *Witcher*, and now I can create a cohesive look out of all these lovingly-crafted cybergoth bits and baubles without worrying about an abstract armour score. Deep down though, I know that this trench coat and sneaking suit combo is secretly hiding a high visibility vest, cargo pants, and chimney sweep hat, and I much prefer the *Witcher* School Gear's union of style and progression.

Since launch it hasn't really felt like you can change Night City, and while the new patches have introduced some more reactive, lingering quests, I find they just highlight how unchanging the rest of the world is. One mission added in 1.6 has an NPC show up at your regular bar, the Afterlife, after you rescue him in a mission. It's nothing too impactful, but it's nice to see him around. I was hopeful the bar would become a bit of a hangout of sorts, have all my NPC castaways show up there after I save them, but no dice. It's just Tiny Mike here, saying, "V, hey, come here, let's talk," every time I walk in.

PATCH 1.5 ADDED A SICK UNIQUE KATANA CALLED BYAKKO

I'm happy *Cyberpunk 2077* is getting a new lease on life – it's not my favourite game CDPR has made, but even as I complain and pick at individual component parts, it has a capacity for immersing me in another world that makes all my issues seem tiny. It's almost like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, another game I could complain about all day, but never stop coming back to. The thing is, I'm not sure as much has changed as the game's redemption arc would indicate. While I'm glad I finally took the time to revisit it, the big improvements to my experience came from my upgraded hardware and a tasteful selection of QoL mods. CDPR has done an admirable job supporting *Cyberpunk* and tidying up its technical issues, but both the successes and failures of its core design remain unchanged. ■



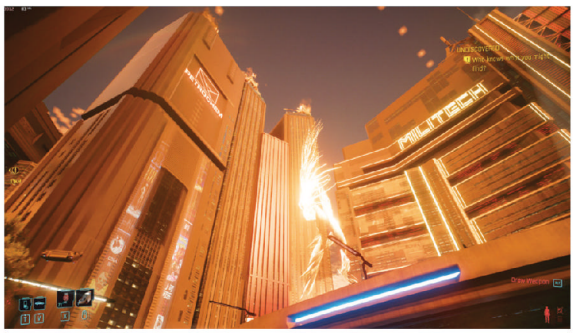
CYBER UPDATES

The best post-launch additions to Cyberpunk 2077

WARDROBE
If you're going to be a cyber punk, you gotta look the part and *Cyberpunk*'s deluge of vendor trash armour did not make it easy. Thankfully, fashion and survivability are now separate affairs with the game's new transmog system.

ROACH RACE
I'm a sucker for a fourth wall gag, and this game-within-a-game platformer staring Geralt of Rivia's trusty horse is a definite winner. Nabbing a high score also gets you a cute little cowboy outfit, perfect for your next build.

BYAKKO
Cyberpunk's combat lends itself to cyborg ninja builds, and this fashionable blade from fixer Wakako Okada lets you leap to enemies like a *Mass Effect* Vanguard. A little wonky in practice, but fun enough I didn't care.



FAR LEFT: One update added neat little Tron RGB lights to the motorcycles.

BELOW: It really is a gorgeous game on the right hardware.

DEFEAT

WARHAMMER 40K: DARKTIDE

Save Tertium from the forces of Chaos. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

How to get cosmetics:
bit.ly/3iaMA5U

Which class to play:
bit.ly/3EVI2dV

Darktide tips:
bit.ly/3gAurhF

SLIDEWAYS

1 The first thing you need to learn to survive *Darktide*'s melee combat is the slide. By pressing a direction and the space bar, you can swoop backwards or to side to side, allowing you to evade enemy blows and hack away at a horde while remaining relatively unscathed.

PUSH THEM BACK

2 Blocking with your weapon and pushing smaller enemies back is a great way to stun them, and I'd suggest incorporating it into your melee combos. More importantly, you can block while reviving a fallen comrade, though you'll be interrupted if your stamina runs out.

SOMETHING SPECIAL

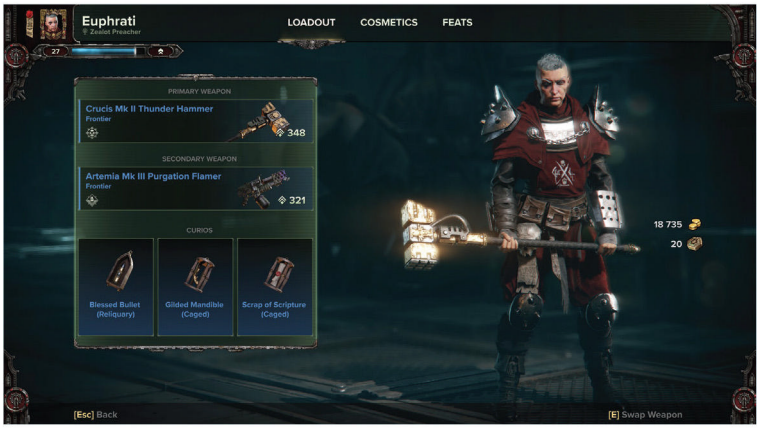
3 You can also complement your melee combos with special moves. While those like the combat knife give you a lil jab, the Thunder Hammer provides powerful single target DPS attacks. These moves are attached to an alternate mouse button, so you may need to rebind.

YOU'RE IT!

4 Keeping your team alive is all about responding to special enemies as quickly as possible, so whenever you see a threat, you should tag it with the middle mouse button. When you do, your character will call it out, so you can all gun it down before it kills you.

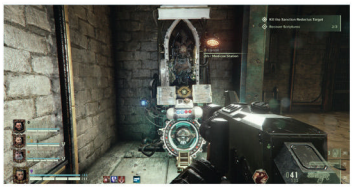
STAY CLOSE

5 Having a close-knit team is vital, since standing near your squad recharges your 'toughness' – your shield. Being close to allies also grants a coherency benefit, which you can unlock at trust level 15, and find in the third row of your abilities.



CURIOS-ITY KILLS

6 You can boost your health and toughness even further by equipping Curios. These talismans first unlock at trust level 8, buffing the number of wounds you can take, or even how much corruption affects your character.



SHARING IS CARING

7 The best way to foster a friendly team of reprobates is to share around supplies. If there's only one heal left in a Medicae Station – which you can tell by its glowing lights – perhaps give it to a comrade in need. Unless you're roleplaying a complete git, that is.

WEAPONS OF WAR *Walk softly and carry a big gun*

HARD ENOUGH

8 As with any training, it's important to find your difficulty sweet spot and get comfortable with it. There's no point throwing yourself in the deep end if you end up wiping or dragging down your team. Better to learn a difficulty and the threat it poses before moving on.

SHINY NEW WEAPONS

9 As you gain trust levels, so too will more powerful weapons become available. The best way to make *Darktide* easier is to use equipment with the highest power level possible, since this will hit harder, and save your fingers from clicking quite so much.

FEAT FETISH

10 Feats are your greatest asset: passive abilities and skills that define the class you've chosen and how you want to play them. You can choose a new one every five trust levels, with six active overall. You can also reallocate them if you want to try out some more.

COVER YOUR BASES

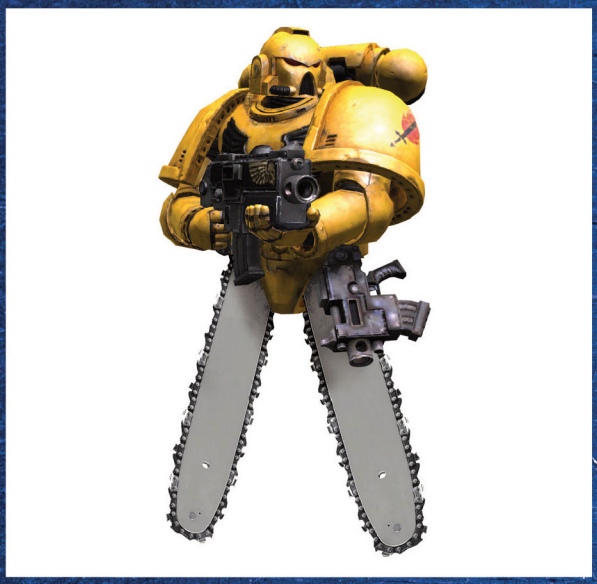
11 Having an answer to every potential threat is how squads triumph, but when you're playing with randoms, there's no guarantee this'll be the case. It's important to understand your class's strengths, but that doesn't mean you can't prepare outside your wheelhouse.

SUPPRESS

12 *Darktide*'s new ranged system lets you suppress gun-toting enemies so you can approach. Ripper guns or flamers are fantastic for staggering enemies or keeping their heads down so your Preacher can run up and plant a chainaxe in their face.

BATTLE READY

Thunder hammers? Boltguns? Old hat! WARHAMMER 40,000 needs some new weapons



CHAINSAW LEGS

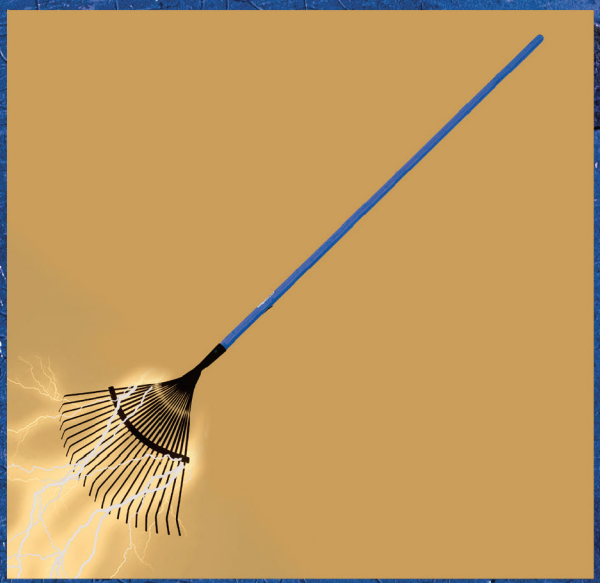
Even the mightiest warrior only has two arms. By weaponising other, currently redundant limbs, we can increase every space marine's killing potential by 100%!

BLACK LIB-RAY

Downloads the text of the entire Horus Heresy novel series to date into your enemy's brain, inducing a lore overdose fatal to all but the biggest nerds (who can simply be punched instead).

THE ENERVATOR

Simply impale your enemy with this blade and they'll be set ablaze, melted from the inside out, and their heart will calcify and explode, causing severe fatigue.



POWER RAKE

Lay a few of these along your enemy's route of attack, and watch them defeat themselves with their own heavy footfalls! Also useful for tending particularly stubborn gardens.

...UNTIL APR 03

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